My Hopes Are Prone to Elevate
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My Hopes Are Prone to Elevate

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Summary

COMPLETE!

Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander are two consecutive number one draft picks for the Ottawa Centaurs. After a year playing in Russia, Ilya joins Shane to begin their rookie year, and they navigate the start of their careers together.

Answering the question: what if Ilya and Shane had been drafted to the same team?

Inspired by every rookie bestie dynamic duo in the NHL that made you think, "what if they kissed???"

Notes

A few notes before we start!

1. In this fic, Ilya is a year older than Shane, so he gets drafted a year earlier, and then spends a season playing in Russia before starting in the NHL.

2. Because of this timeline shift, the iconic hotel gym scene takes place at the World Juniors in Regina where Shane and Ilya meet for the first time, rather than at the draft. Our story beings after these things have happened off-page.

3. This is the most ambitious fic I have ever attempted, and at this point I don't know how long it will be, but it will at least go through our boys' first season together!

4. No smut yet, but there will be :)

5. Title is a lyric from "Jump Rope Gazers" by The Beths, one of my ultimate Hollanov songs.

6. Thank you SO MUCH to Paupy and Nico beta-ing this beast of a first chapter and for being the most encouraging google doc buddies!

7. Ok I'll stop stalling.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Of course Yuna Hollander wanted to drive her son in for his first day of development camp with the Ottawa Centaurs, but Shane insisted on driving himself. He was already going to be one of the youngest guys there; he was the hometown hero, the nice Canadian boy-next-door who was supposedly going to save the franchise and bring them a cup for the first time. The expectations were astronomically high, and Shane worried about how the other guys might feel about him. He had dealt with bitterness and jealousy from teammates since he was a kid. He didn't need to also be the guy whose mom drove him to his first day in the NHL. How humiliating.

He pulled up to the practice facility an hour early, grabbed his gear, and headed inside. The staff told him that he could go ahead onto the ice if he wanted to, which was exactly what he'd had in mind — a little peaceful time skating freely before the overwhelming day ahead. What he didn't expect was to see someone already out there shooting pucks into the net. His annoyance morphed into a spark of excitement and anxiety when he realized who it was: Ilya Rozanov.

Shane had spent the better part of the last six months thinking about Rozanov, knowing he would have to face him eventually, but no amount of anticipation could have prepared Shane for seeing him in the flesh again.

The last time they had been alone in a room together was in that tiny hotel gym in Regina the night before the World Juniors final, when Shane led Canada to defeat Russia. It was a charged interaction that left Shane feeling confused and a little bit obsessed. Shane had hoped for a chance to talk to Rozanov before he returned to Russia, but he never got one. So he was left to wonder about that night and if Rozanov had felt the same things Shane had. He hoped so. Or maybe he hoped not. Which would be worse?

After that night, Shane had tracked Rozanov closely — finding anything he could in English about his performance in Russia, devouring all the commentary from Canadian and American media leading up to that year's draft. Rozanov was a year older than Shane and in the draft class a year before him. Everyone expected him to be the number one pick. Shane had holed up in his bedroom to watch the first pick alone, not wanting any distractions or commentary from his parents, and he found himself feeling a misplaced sense of pride when

the rep for Ottawa called out Rozanov's name. Shane was enthralled by the giant smile on his face and curious why he was there with only his coach, not his parents. Shane couldn't have imagined his parents not being there to watch him get drafted.

On top of pressure he felt from his hometown and hockey media and, hell, all of Canada to perform, and his own expectations of himself, the knowledge that Shane would soon face Rozanov once again had weighed on his mind. Especially when the Centaurs won the draft lottery a second year in a row, and it was almost guaranteed that Shane would be the number one pick. So Shane continued to follow Rozanov's final year in Russia before he came over to Canada to join the Centaurs the following season. Shane couldn't stop his mind from dwelling on his once-rival and future teammate.

Would they stay rivals, vying for the first line center spot? Would they become friends, two number one draft picks who had the whole hockey world watching their every move? Were the rumors about Rozanov true, that he partied hard and slept with lots of women? Shane couldn't relate to that *at all* , and he wondered if Rozanov would tease him for it like some of his past teammates did. He sometimes absently thought about how he might not hate sweaty dancing in a club if it was Rozanov's body pressed against him. But no, Shane would never want that to happen *for real.*

Shane tried to ignore the constant churn of thoughts about Rozanov, because he didn't want to acknowledge the implications of his obsession, which went beyond his standard encyclopedia knowledge of every NHL player and prospect's skills and stats. In the quiet nights in his billet room or at home in his own bed, he would lie awake thinking about the curve of Rozanov's neck where it met his shoulder, the grunts of his effort as he ran faster and faster on the treadmill, the bead of sweat that dripped down his forehead onto his full pink lips, and the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

That night in the hotel came rushing back now as Shane took to the ice and Rozanov turned around to see who else was there. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and his lush golden curls were every bit as captivating as Shane remembered. And, oh god, when he saw Shane, his face twisted into a wry smile.

"Hollander," Shane had forgotten how much he liked Rozanov's deep, curling Russian-accented voice. "Knew you would be early too."

Shane buzzed with the knowledge that Rozanov had apparently been

thinking about him too.

“Not as early as you,” Shane tilted his head in acknowledgement, returning the wry smile as he skated over to Rozanov. He pulled off his right glove and reached out a hand, and Rozanov took it in a firm handshake. “It’s really good to see you. Sorry about your loss at World Juniors,” Shane teased, hoping it was charming rather than rude.

“You are not sorry,” Rozanov chucked, and the sound was intoxicating. “But is fine, we are teammates now. Will win together.”

“Damn right,” Shane grinned back, relieved to have gotten this first interaction over with, and proud of himself for being normal enough, even though it felt like literal butterflies inside his whole chest and stomach.

The one thing Shane always felt comfortable doing was playing hockey. So he skated ahead a few feet and tapped his stick on the ice. Rozanov immediately passed him a puck, then skated forward to receive Shane’s returned pass. And without another word, they fell into a rhythm of passing and shooting, as if they had been playing together for years.

Eventually, coaches and other players made their way out to the ice, and an assistant coach called out to them, “Rozanov, Hollander, let’s get started.”

They skated over to the bench where everyone was gathered. The coaches were still chatting, but all players’ eyes were on them, a couple of guys in the back leaned in to whisper to each other and laugh lightly. Shane was used to that kind of reaction, and he glanced over to Rozanov, who had clearly seen it too. Rozanov rolled his eyes and Shane smiled back at him, relieved that he could share this moment with someone who understood.

One guy, though, came right up to both of them to introduce himself. Shane recognized him as Hayden Pike, a left winger from Rozanov’s draft class, somewhere toward the end of the first round. If Shane remembered correctly, he’d spent the last year doing fairly well in the major juniors.

“Hey, I’m Hayden!” He had a wide, friendly smile and held his hand out to Shane then to Rozanov to shake. “Great to meet you guys! Super excited to play with you, this team is going to kick ass!”

Shane said hello and returned his smile, though maybe not as brightly.

Hayden was so cheerful and earnest, and Shane wondered if he'd ever looked that happy to be anywhere. But he was glad to have another friendly face here. Rozanov, on the other hand, was looking at Hayden like he was an annoying pest as Hayden began chattering about how excited he was, asking Shane about living in Ottawa, and speculating about what they'd be doing this week.

Shane and Hayden became fast friends, mostly because Hayden didn't really give Shane the option not to be. He parked himself next to Shane whenever they were gathered in a group or eating lunch, waited until Shane was walking out to the parking garage to walk with him. And it didn't seem like Hayden was trying to tether himself to Shane for clout, he was just a genuinely friendly person, and he talked enough for the both of them. By the end of the week, Shane and Hayden had decided they would get an apartment together for their first season — on the very safe assumption that Shane was going to get a contract. Shane had even invited Hayden over for dinner with his parents on his last night in town before Hayden went back home to Toronto for the rest of the summer.

Meanwhile, Shane was constantly drifting towards Rozanov. It wasn't even conscious most of the time, he just found himself gravitating to him. They didn't talk much, but Rozanov was quick to fist bump Shane after a nice move in practice or good rep in the gym, and his cheers roared when Shane scored a goal when they were on the same team in scrimmages. He'd also chirp Shane and call him slow in sprints — as the only guy on the ice faster than Shane. Rozanov didn't spare a second glance at Hayden, though.

Shane could tell that Rozanov sometimes struggled to keep up with the fast-paced English, and sometimes French, spoken all around him — he stuck close to the one Russian assistant coach who translated a lot. Shane had fleeting thoughts of trying to learn some Russian before the season started, to better communicate with his new teammate.

The only time Shane consciously avoided Rozanov was in the locker room and the showers. He tried not to think too deeply about *why* , but Shane knew he needed to keep some distance to prevent a repeat of his feelings that night back at the hotel in Regina. The thought of being in the showers with Rozanov was one he saved for those nights lying awake in bed.

He did try to invite Rozanov over for dinner at his house along with Hayden, but Rozanov declined, saying he had an early flight back to Moscow the next day.

Shane tried to hide his disappointment, nodding and saying, “Oh okay, yeah, that makes sense. Well, uh, the invitation stands when you come back. My parents live here, so… yeah.”

“Thank you,” was his simple reply.

“Are you, um, excited to go back home?” Shane asked, not wanting the conversation to end.

“No.”

Shane waited for Rozanov to say more, but he didn’t. He just held eye contact with Shane for a few beats, then said, “See you soon, Hollander. We will win together.” He repeated what he’d said on their first day, with a single nod and half-smile.

Over the rest of the summer, Shane thought about that half-smile *a lot* .

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Moving in with Hayden the week before training camp started was a bit much, and Shane almost wished he had stayed in the peace of his parents’ house, but he knew he had to do this. Grow up, be an adult, live on his own. And in this case “on his own” meant living with a loud and messy goofball who always beat Shane at video games and couldn’t cook, but who made Shane feel less nervous and serious about starting in the NHL in a week.

Walking into the locker room on the first day of training camp was much more intimidating than development camp. It wasn’t just a bunch of guys all around Shane’s age, all equally nervous and eager to prove themselves. No, the room was full of real life, longtime NHL players. Men with wives and children, some of whom had been drafted before Shane was even born. He was glad to have fearless Hayden as his self-designated wing man, which extended from the locker room to “picking up chicks” at bars — something he had yet to convince Shane to attempt.

The thing about Shane was that he was confident and self-assured the instant he got on the ice. But he struggled to maintain that confidence when interacting with other people. Then he was awkward and quick to deflect attention. He just wanted to put his head down and work. The socializing in rowdy locker rooms and being “one of the guys” was never his thing. He hoped he could practice and improve his social skills the same way he did with hockey, but so far, he didn’t

think it had worked very well. But this was a fresh start, the first day of the rest of his life, and he was determined to be successful.

The Ottawa captain, a veteran defenseman named Conrad DelZotto, approached Shane as he set his stuff down, looking with awe at his name on the stall in front of him.

“Pretty cool, eh?” DelZotto nudged him with his elbow, looking at Shane’s stall with him.

Shane turned to face the older man. He was a huge guy, probably 6’5” and all muscle. And he was one of the best players in Ottawa history, who had played here his whole 12-year career, but he had no cups or rings to show for it. Shane could see the weary look in his eyes that came from years of coming up short.

“Yeah, really cool.” Shane replied, turning to look at him. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir.”

DelZotto let out a booming laugh and looked at Shane with a combination of amusement and pity. “Damn kid, I’m not that old! Call me Delzy or Zotto, okay? None of this ‘sir’ shit.”

Shane blushed and ducked his head with a huffed out laugh and tried again, “Right, sorry, that was weird. Good to meet you Delzy.”

Delzy nodded once emphatically and said, “Much better.” Then he looked over Shane’s shoulder and called, “Hey, Rozanov, come over here!”

Shane whipped his head around, and sure enough, there was Ilya Rozanov. Shane had been mentally counting down the days until he saw Rozanov again, and seeing him now felt the same as it did at development camp. A thrill. A knot in his stomach. A bright heat running through him. But now his new captain and probably a bunch of new teammates were watching, so he kept it together and smiled, close-lipped, at Rozonav as he walked over.

“Delzy,” Rozanov nodded at their captain like they had been playing together for years, and Shane marveled at how nonchalant he was.

“Glad you’re both here before the room fills up too much,” he looked back and forth from Shane to Rozanov. “Listen, I know what it’s like to be the first overall draft pick. Everyone telling you you’re the best for years, all the hype, all the sponsorships, all the expectations. It’s a lot on a kid—”

“Am not a kid.” Rozanov interjected.

“You’re a kid to me, kid!” Delzy scoffed, “But I like your confidence. You’re going to need it. But don’t get too arrogant, it won’t make you any friends. And it’s good to have friends in the league. You never know where you’ll end up.”

Shane was nodding along emphatically, absorbing every bit of knowledge and wisdom he could. Rozanov just blinked, looking bored.

“Anyway. What I wanted to say is if you need anything, any help adjusting to the league or for personal stuff, too, you can talk to me. You’re going to have it the hardest of any rookies, and I won’t lie, we are expecting a lot from you. But I’m here to help if I can. I’d like to actually win something before I retire.”

And with that, he clapped them both on the shoulder and turned away to start getting dressed for practice, leaving Shane standing next to Rozanov. Shane had been preparing for this moment for months, wondering how it would go, and practicing what he would say.

So Shane took a deep breath, turned to Rozanov and asked, very slowly and with determination, *“Privet. Kak proshlo tvoyo leto?”*

For a second Rozanov just stared at him with wide eyes, and then he burst out into shocked laughter, almost doubling over with the intensity of it.

Shane felt his cheeks get warm and knew he was blushing. Fuck, this was such a stupid idea. Why had Shane thought he should learn a Russian greeting? He wanted to impress Rozanov or something, but now he realized how ridiculous that was.

“Uh, nevermind, that was dumb,” Shane started to backtrack and walk away, but Rozanov put his hand on Shane’s shoulder to stop him.

“Hollander, no,” Rozanov took a few breaths to stop laughing, “Not dumb. Am sorry for laughing. You surprised me so much, I did not expect you to hear you speak Russian!”

Shane thought that Rozanov’s English was noticeably stronger than it was in July. He’d made a lot more progress than Shane did with Russian, that’s for sure.

“Oh, heh, yeah, I um… I wanted to learn something to say to you. To,

you know, make you feel welcome?"

Rozanov smiled at him with warmth in his eyes Shane hadn't seen before, and Shane felt his cheeks get even warmer.

"Thank you. And I had a good summer. Sort of. Was fine." Rozanov shrugged to punctuate his sentence.

"Cool, good. Um…" Shane had only prepared one Russian phrase, and now that he'd said it, he wasn't sure what to do with himself. So he just looked at Rozanov, both of them smiling at each other. A loud burst of laughter from across the room interrupted the moment, and Shane pulled his gaze away.

"We should get ready, yes? For practice." Rozanov said. "Maybe later I teach you more Russian," he laughed as he walked over to his stall. Shane nodded enthusiastically to his back, "Sure, yeah, that would be great!" He was maybe *too* enthusiastic. But he couldn't stop the smile from spreading across his face.

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Rooming with Hayden on road trips made sense on paper — they already lived together and knew each other's routines and habits. So when Hayden said he was going to ask the travel coordinator to put them together, Shane just shrugged and said ok.

Unfortunately, Shane didn't really think about the fact that Hayden's routines were chaotic at best, and nonexistent at worst, and his habits were messy and a little gross, until it was too late and they were sharing a hotel room in Boston.

"Wanna watch a movie?" Hayden asked, eyes wide and hopeful. It was 8pm, so they had some time before they needed to sleep. But Shane was hoping for a little quiet to calm his nerves about the game tomorrow afternoon. Boston was the best team on their schedule so far, and Shane really wanted to beat them in their first matchup of the year. He hated to disappoint Hayden, but they watched movies together all the time.

"I think I'm going to take a walk." Shane replied, leaning to grab his shoes.

"I'll come with you!" Hayden bounced off his bed. Shane sighed.

"Um, I kinda wanted to go by myself?" He grimaced apologetically.

“I’m sorry, I just really want to clear my head before tomorrow.”“Oh, sure, that makes sense.”

Shane could tell that it did *not* make sense to Hayden. And he understood that for Hayden, being alone must be a big change. He grew up with 3 siblings and was probably used to the chaos of a full house and lots of noise. But Shane was an only child, and as something of a hockey prodigy as a kid, he spent a lot of time alone or with his parents in the car. Maybe he missed out on a “normal” childhood, but this was all he wanted since he was 5, and it was worth the sacrifice to Shane.

“I’ll be back soon,” Shane said as he grabbed his key card and phone and walked out the door before Hayden could pull him into another conversation.

He made his way out of the hotel, not really knowing where he was going, but the hotel wasn’t far from Boston Common. As Shane approached the entrance to the park, he noticed someone sitting on a bench, head ducked and wearing a Centaurs beanie, taking a drag from a cigarette. Shane’s heart leapt when he recognized Rozanov.

“Hey, can I join you?” Shane asked tentatively.

Rozanov snapped his head up in surprise, but smiled the faintest smile when he saw it was Shane.

“Of course,” he nodded.

He scooted over a few inches to make room on the small bench, and Shane sat down.

“You know you really shouldn’t be smoking. It’s so unhealthy.” Shane couldn’t help himself, he had to say something.

“Really? Thought it was good for health.” Rozanov deadpanned.

“I’m just saying, I’m surprised the team isn’t making you quit.”

“They are.” Rozanov took a final drag and stamped out the butt on the bench, putting it in his pocket. “But is hard to stop. I have one only sometimes.”

“Is that why you’re all the way out here? Didn’t want to get caught?” Shane nudged him.

Rozanov looked at Shane with a smirk, “Caught me,” he chuckled. “Why are you out here? I know Shane Hollander never ever smokes.”

Shane laughed, “Yeah, that’s true.”

“Too good, always a good boy.” Rozanov grinned at him now, and the familiar butterflies in Shane’s stomach hummed to life.

Rozanov was everything Shane wasn’t, and Shane was transfixed by him. He was tall, brash, self-assured. Even though Rozanov was only a year older than Shane, it felt like he was a *man* . He had chest hair and a deep voice, he smoked cigarettes and drank straight vodka, he lived alone in his own fancy apartment, thousands of miles away from his home. He carried himself like he didn’t give a single fuck what anyone thought about him, and he bragged about his talent and unrepentant ambition relentlessly. In comparison, Shane still felt like a sheltered kid, still living in the city he grew up in. Always polite, always humble.

“Yeah, I guess I am.” Shane ducked his head and blushed.

“I like it.” Rozanov said.

“You do?” Shane was shocked. “You don’t think I’m lame for not partying or smoking or hooking up with girls all the time?”

“You are boring,” Rozanov said so plainly it made Shane laugh. “But is not a bad thing. Just… you.” He shrugged one shoulder.

Shane wasn’t sure whether or not he should be offended, but Rozanov wasn’t *wrong* , and it didn’t feel like a criticism.

Shane looked at him and smiled. “Uh, thanks. You’re definitely not boring,” he said with a laugh. “But I like it, Rozanov.”

“Ilya.”

“What?”

“My name. You call me Ilya.”

“Oh! Sorry! Everyone calls you Rozanov or Roz, I just figured… I thought that’s what you wanted.” Shane was blushing again. He felt terrible that he had made an assumption about his teammate.

“Is okay. Not for everyone. But Shane Hollander, you call me Ilya,

okay?"

Shane had to bite his lips to contain the grin that threatened to break out across his face.

"Okay. Yep. Ilya. And you can call me Shane. Or Hollander. Or whatever, really."

Shane kept his tone light, but he was over the moon. It felt like he had broken through and they might actually become friends. He didn't want to ruin it by being a complete dork about something so minor. But it didn't feel minor, it felt huge. He should quit while he was ahead.

"Well, I think I'm going to walk back…" Shane said and stood up. "Want to walk with me?"

Rozanov — no, Ilya — stood, said nothing, and started walking towards their hotel, his long strides forcing Shane to jog a little to catch up.

"Ilya, wait up!"

He didn't turn back, but Shane could see the corners of his mouth twist up the tiniest bit. They walked in silence for a minute while Shane worked up the courage to say something. To his surprise, Ilya spoke first.

"You want to know more Russian?" He asked.

"Oh sure! Yeah, I'd love that!" Shane bounced a little as he walked, excited Ilya had remembered his offer to teach him.

"What you want to learn? How to say please and thank you?"

Shane laughed and rolled his eyes, "No… I already learned those."

Ilya laughed loudly and shook his head. "Okay, this one Try: *Idi na khui."*

Shane repeated it slowly, "Idi…na…khui." And Ilya laughed again, holding his stomach to steady himself.

"What?" Shane asked, also laughing though he didn't know why. "What did I say?"

Between laughs, Ilya managed to say, "Go to the dick," before

cracking up again.

“What??? Why would I say that?” Shane blushed. *He had to stop blushing all the time around Ilya.* The sexual implications were there, but he knew it must be something else.

Ilya gathered himself and finally replied, “Is like to say ‘go fuck yourself’ in English. Good for chirping. You can say to Scott Hunter.”

“OH.” Shane laughed, relieved. “Okay, yeah, that’s great, I will use that!”

Shane repeated the phrase a few times, trying to commit it to memory. Ilya nodded, seemingly pleased with himself. And that was about when they got back to the hotel.

They walked in companionable silence to the elevator, and when they got in, Shane turned to Ilya, who looked back at him. Ilya smirked and said, “Can teach you more Russian chirping some time. We will make Shane Hollander a bad boy soon.”

“Oh yeah, such a bad boy,” Shane tried to roll his eyes, but it was hard to do when he was smiling so wide. “Just like you, right?”

Ilya didn’t respond, but he licked his lower lip. Shane’s heartbeat raced and he stuck his hands in his pockets, looking to the elevator door instead of the wet spot that Ilya’s tongue left on his pink bottom lip. He was relieved and slightly disappointed when said door opened.

They parted ways in the hotel hallway with “goodnights” and small waves. Ilya went back to the room he was sharing with Mason Lapierre, the right wing on Shane’s line with Hayden, and Shane went back to his, walking slowly to let his nerves cool down before he had to interact with his roommate.

When Shane opened the door, Hayden was coming out of the bathroom. They passed each other as Shane headed in to brush his teeth.

“Why do you smell like cigarettes? Where did you go?” Hayden asked, a disgusted look on his face.

“What? I do?” Shane sniffed his shirt. He hadn’t thought about the fact that sitting so close to Ilya would mean the cigarette smell would linger on him. “Um, I walked through Boston Common and passed

some people smoking. Must be that…" he trailed off, hoping Hayden didn't press him on it.

Shane didn't know why, but he didn't want to share that he had bumped into Ilya on his walk. Something about the conversation felt so intimate, he wanted to keep that moment just between them.

As he lay in bed, he played their entire interaction over in his head, again and again. Shane couldn't stop hearing the words " *Shane Hollander, you call me Ilya.* " He loved the way his full name sounded in Ilya's warm, heavy voice, almost as much as he loved the sound of Ilya saying his own first name. It rolled off the tongue so beautifully, and reverberated through Shane on an endless loop. Shane drifted off with Ilya's name whispered on his lips.

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They won their game in Boston 2-1, and Shane had scored one of their goals — Ilya had scored the other. So Shane was riding a high on the bus to the airport. They were flying straight to New York for another tough game the next night. The team was rowdy, celebrating the win that held promise of a good season to come. Ottawa had been struggling for years, and the team and fans had their hopes pinned on these two rookies, and Shane was beginning to think they might just be able to live up to those high hopes.

The bus rumbled through the narrow Boston streets and Delzy stood up at the front, turning to address the team.

"Okay boys, we had one big win—" a cheer rang out through the bus, "—thanks to Roz and Hollander—" another cheer.

"What about me?!" yelled the goalie, Martins Egeland.

"I was getting there, Eggy!" Delzy yelled, "You idiots won't let me talk! As I was saying, big win, but New York is better than Boston, and they have Eric Bennett in net now, so it's going to be a tough one."

"Get to the point!" Someone yelled from the back of the bus, making everyone laugh.

"Fuck you guys, let me fucking *talk!* My point is, no partying, no taking the rookies out to get wasted — that means you Ricci — we need to be fresh as daisies for the game. And if you dumb fucks can get some pucks in the net again, we can celebrate for real tomorrow."

“Yes cap,” was muttered half-heartedly across the bus, and Delzy sat back down shaking his head.

Shane was relieved. He really didn’t feel like going out and being pressured into drinking and talking to girls by his teammates. He wasn’t even able to legally drink in the US, but he knew older guys would be plying them with beers and shots. Hayden, on the other hand, looked disappointed.

“Shit, bud, I really wanted to go out tonight.” Hayden complained. “I’m dying to at least talk to a girl. It’s been too long, am I right?” He nudged Shane suggestively.

“Uh, yeah.” Shane muttered unconvincingly. “But Delzy’s right, we should sleep and get ready for tomorrow. Hunter is looking really good this year and Bennett is a brick wall.”

“Do you ever think about anything other than hockey?” Hayden rolled his eyes. “I want to talk about *girls.* ”

Hayden really was gross sometimes. Shane sighed, “You can talk to all the girls you want tomorrow night if we win.”

“Well you and Roz better score some more goals, then.” Hayden settled into his seat and pulled out his iPod, leaving Shane to his thoughts.

Shane smiled to himself. He liked thinking about himself and Ilya as a unit, leading the team to victory. He didn’t want to get ahead of himself, and he didn’t want to jinx them, so he’d never say it out loud, but Shane thought they had a real chance of getting to the playoffs this year — he wouldn't let himself think beyond that, but… maybe. With him and Ilya, it felt possible to break the team’s years-long playoffs drought this season.

When Hayden sat down with Willy Ricci on the plane — they’d been talking about getting a poker game going — Shane signed with relief. He was more than happy to sit in a window seat by himself and read his book. But as soon as he was settled, Ilya sat down next to him with a grunt and a sigh. He looked exhausted.

Shane tried not to be too happy that Ilya chose to sit with him when there were plenty of open rows.

“Hey, how’re you feeling after the game?” Shane asked.

“Tired.” Was Ilya’s only response.

“Yeah, it was a tough one.”

“Lapierre snores.” Ilya groaned, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back onto the headrest with a grunt.

“Oh no,” Shane laughed. “That sucks, I’m sorry. Hayden doesn’t snore but he’s a total mess.”

“Let me guess, you are very neat?” Ilya asked with a hint of teasing in his voice.

“I mean, yeah, I guess so,” Shane scoffed. “Why, is that bad?”

“I did not say that.” Ilya rolled his head to face Shane and smiled at him, and Shane’s heart fluttered. Damn it, he had to figure out how to stop that from happening every time this guy smiled. “But is another boring, good boy Shane Hollander thing.”

Shane smiled back at Ilya, he didn’t even know why. He was kind of insulting him again, but Shane kind of… loved it.

“I could—” Shane started then stopped himself. “Um, nevermind.”

“What? You could…?”

“I could ask the travel coordinator if we could room together on the next trip.” Shane half-mumbled it. “I don’t snore. So, you know, you could sleep better?” He didn’t look at Ilya, already embarrassed about making the offer.

“Hm. Maybe,” was all Ilya said. Shane ducked his head to hide his face, which was burning with the heat of his embarrassment.

“Oh, I mean, no worries if you don’t want to, I just thought… whatever, nevermind.” Shane turned back to the book he’d had sitting open on his lap. Maybe Shane had been wrong about their burgeoning friendship, and he should stop trying so hard. But Ilya had told Shane to call him by his first name, even though everyone else called him Roz. And that felt like *something* .

“Sorry, uh…” Ilya started. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” Shane shrugged and tried to sound nonchalant. “Just an offer, I don’t really care, just in case it was helpful, no big deal.” He

definitely did *not* sound nonchalant.

They sat in awkward silence for a couple of minutes, just listening to the rabble from the rest of the team. The truth was, Shane did care. He knew it was probably that Ilya didn't want to ruffle any feathers by requesting a change, but Shane couldn't help but take it personally.

Ilya reached into his bag for his iPod and put his headphones on, and settled further down into his seat with his eyes closed. But he didn't move to another seat! So that was a good sign that he didn't completely hate Shane. That left Shane to read, but he was too lost in thought to pay attention to the book.

What was it about Ilya that got Shane so… so eager? Shane was desperate for Ilya to like him, and every kernel of attention he spared Shane felt like a prize he'd earned. He could tell that the older guys on the team liked and respected Ilya, probably for the same reasons Shane did. He was an incredible hockey player, he was a beautiful skater, and so fast. But he was also kind of aloof. He was loud and rowdy in the locker room when everyone else was, he could chirp with the best of them, but when things were quiet, Shane noticed that he didn't make much conversation. He never shared anything about his family or his life in Russia — in all honesty, Shane didn't even know that much about him outside his hockey career. Maybe that's why it felt so good when Ilya talked to him, when they were just one-on-one, even if it was to call Shane boring with that half-smile of his.

And, of course, there was that night in the hotel gym at World Juniors, when Shane felt the electric current buzzing between them, and he was almost certain Ilya wanted to kiss him. Shane had definitely *wanted* Ilya to kiss him. It felt the same in the elevator last night. Shane was hyper aware of how close their bodies were, of the steady rise and fall of Ilya's chest as he breathed. Of the press of his full lips while he spoke, and the way Shane felt a kind of small next to his impressive height — but it didn't bother him. It made him, absurdly, want to be held in Ilya's large arms.

Every time they were next to each other, he secretly hoped that spark would ignite again. Shane always felt it, but it was only on rare occasions when he felt it radiating back to him from Ilya. Only when they were alone, and maybe when Ilya had let his walls down a little. Shane knew he shouldn't want it, he knew Ilya probably *wasn't* about to kiss Shane either of those times, and he probably wasn't interested in him in that way at all. But the desire lingered.

Shane wasn't sure what any of this meant about his sexuality. Wanting a guy to kiss him and being obsessed with said guy's lips and arms certainly fell outside the parameters of "straight," but Shane did have a pretty serious girlfriend in high school. They had even had sex a couple of times, and Shane felt okay about it. They broke up, but only because she was going to college far away, or that's what she told Shane.

So he was pretty sure he wasn't totally gay. That thought terrified him. You couldn't be a gay NHL player, it just didn't work like that. Shane was supposed to meet a girl and get married and have like 3 kids before he was 30. But when he tried to picture that, it felt off. He could only really picture himself playing hockey for the next, he hoped, 20 years. Other than that, he didn't know what he wanted out of life. He vaguely thought he'd like to be a dad, but he just couldn't picture it.

He heaved a heavy sigh and picked his book back up, trying to ignore the warmth of the man next to him. He needed to focus on hockey, and only hockey. That's what was important, and he had to stop getting distracted.

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It was a brutal game against New York. Halfway through the second period and it was a shutout on both sides, both teams seemed to be getting more and more agitated over their inability to score. Shane was sitting on the bench itching to play, but he also loved watching Ilya terrorize the Admirals.

He was currently slamming Scott Hunter against the boards and fighting him for the puck, and he finally managed to take possession and pass the puck to Ricci, who passed it back to Ilya in the neutral zone. Ilya deked around a defenceman and then it was just Ilya facing down Eric Bennett, New York's All-Star goalie who was having an amazing season.

Shane was on the edge of the bench, hands gripping the boards, silently willing Ilya to make the move he'd been practicing. When Ilya got to the net, he switched to his backhand and pulled back to take the shot. In the split-second when Bennett ducked to where he thought the puck would go, Ilya switched it up and sent a perfect forehand wrist shot over Bennett's left shoulder.

Shane was on his feet cheering before the puck was even in the net —

he knew it was going in. He'd watch Ilya practice that move probably a hundred times at this point, and he'd perfected it. The rest of the bench joined Shane a second later, yelling and banging their sticks against the boards. Ilya skated over to his lineys to celebrate, and then made his way to the bench for arm and helmet pats from the rest of the guys.

"Nice one, Roz," their coach nodded to him. He was a stoic man, not unkind, but very serious. So the compliment was huge, and Shane felt proud of Ilya for the praise. As if Shane had anything to do with it.

It was a TV timeout, so they had a couple extra seconds to breathe. Ilya climbed back to the bench, lightly pushing Bobby Staal out of the way so he could sit next to Shane. He was breathing hard, squirting water into his mouth, but smiling broadly. Shane elbowed him and, grinning, said, "That was a fucking beauty. You nailed that move, they're going to start calling it 'the Rozanov.'"

Ilya didn't say anything, but he put his giant gloved hand on Shane's helmet and shook him affectionately, making Shane giggle and shove at Ilya to get off him. He was so happy in that moment — this is exactly what he had always dreamed of.

Shane jumped up and over the boards for his shift, and Ilya pointed at him, simply saying, "Your turn." Shane grinned and skated away.

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Shane didn't score a goal, and neither did anyone else, including the Admirals. Even though it was only 1-0 when the clock hit zero, it was still a win against the best team in the East, and they would take it.

On the bus back to their hotel, which was even louder than it had been the previous day in Boston, Delzy stood up in the front again to address the team.

"Not again!" someone yelled with a thick Russian accent. Shane whipped his head back to see that it was Ilya — of course it was, he was the only Russian on the team. But as a rookie, Shane couldn't imagine being so insubordinate to their captain. But that was the difference between him and Ilya, right?

"Watch it Roz, you may have gotten our only goal tonight, but you're still a rookie, bud!" Everyone, including Ilya, laughed. He looked so happy, head thrown back in with laughter, and it took Shane a lot of effort to turn his head back toward their captain.

“So as I was saying! We fucking won, let’s fucking celebrate!!” The whole bus cheered, Shane included. “Just a travel day tomorrow, so get changed and meet in the lobby, we’re going to a club — no excuses, Hollander! I’m buying you a drink for that goal yesterday!”

He pointed at Shane, who ducked his head as a few guys reached over and shoved him playfully. He might be “boring” and so awkward with girls, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want to celebrate with his team. He really wanted to prove to them that he could hang with the guys, even if it made him nervous and uncomfortable. The only way to get better at it was practice, just like hockey. He just had to practice.

The problem, as always, was that Shane didn’t really have any “club” clothes. He mostly wore athletic-wear or a suit for gamedays, and he didn’t have much in between, especially not with him on a roadtrip. So he decided to keep on his grey suit pants and button-down with the first few buttons undone.

“You look like you just got off your job as an accountant,” Hayden said, grimacing at Shane as he pulled on a hideous graphic tee that had skulls and flames and a dragon on it.

“And what are you, trying to be in some sort of motorcycle gang?” Shane chirped back.

“Hey, my older sister got me this shirt, it’s cool!” Hayden protested, looking down at the monstrosity. “She said girls will like it.”

Shane shrugged. He really had no idea what girls liked, so maybe Hayden was right. But he also wondered if his sister had given him that shirt as a prank.

“Bud, you at least have to put on jeans, didn’t you bring any?” Hayden started rustling through Shane’s bag.

“Hey! Stop! You’re messing up my packing system!” Shane batted Hayden’s hands away and reached in for the jeans he’d unearthed from the suitcase.

“Of course you have a ‘packing system,’” Hayden rolled his eyes. “And wear those, that’s like slightly better.”

Shane sighed looking at himself in the mirror. He felt ridiculous in his jeans and dress shirt, but this was probably as good as it was going to get. At least he had brought the nice leather boots his mom got him for Christmas last year, to wear with his suit.

Down in the lobby, Shane was chatting with a couple of other guys, waiting for the rest of the group to arrive. Some of the older guys were going to bed, saying their partying days were over. But they had a decent group, including Delzy who was a rare hockey player in his 30s who wasn't married or with a serious girlfriend.

He was absentmindedly nodding along to someone droning on about his golf game when the elevator dinged and Ilya walked out. He was wearing black skinny jeans and a black t-shirt that was so tight on his shoulders, Shane wondered how it wasn't ripping. He had rolled up the short sleeves so they were snug on the widest bulge of his biceps. He looked effortlessly cool, brushing back the golden curls that had flopped into his eyes as he greeted everyone.

Shane knew he was staring, but he couldn't help himself. His mouth felt dry, and he realized his lips were slightly parted so he quickly snapped them closed. He had to get these feelings under control. It was so wrong for so many reasons, first and foremost that Ilya was a teammate, oh yeah, and he was a *man*.

He didn't stop staring fast enough, because Ilya looked over at him and their eyes locked. Shane didn't know what to do. Should he smile? Say hi? Run away? Running away was probably the smart move right now, he didn't know what he might say. Ilya dazzled Shane with his signature smirking half-smile, and yeah, Shane definitely needed to run.

At that exact moment, the group started moving to the front doors of the hotel, and Hayden grabbed Shane's arm to drag him along, leaving Ilya somewhere behind them. So Shane just resolved to stay away from Ilya as much as he could tonight, and he wouldn't need to worry about his knees getting weak at the sight of him.

After a few hours in the loud, dark club, and three beers and a shot of tequila that Hayden and Egeland had basically forced on him, Shane had decided: he hated clubs. They'd gotten into the VIP area with the help of a hockey-fan bouncer, and Shane was sitting all the way in the back on a couch by himself, drunkenly watching everyone else have fun.

One person in particular seemed to be having a *lot* of fun: Ilya Rozanov. He was out on the dance floor with a big arm wrapped around a blond in a shockingly short dress, their bodies plastered together, and taking swigs of his beer between messy kisses.

A bunch of the other guys were also out dancing, some with women like Ilya was, some just kind of in the crowd, like Hayden. And a few other guys were over at another table yelling over each other about something Shane couldn't bring himself to care about.

He was laser-focused on Ilya. The sway of his hips, the way his sweat-soaked hair fell into his eyes, the grip of his large hand — now on the girl's ass — and the way his lips moved when he kissed her. Shane wondered how it would feel to have those lips on his, that hand on him, and he hastily grabbed an abandoned shot from the table in front of him to chase the thoughts away.

He grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut as he choked down the burning liquor, and when he opened his eyes again, Delzy was standing there, looking down imposingly at him. Shane tried to stand, but he wobbled and fell back down.

"I should have known you'd be such a lightweight, Hollander." Delzy shook his head and shoved Shane lightly over on the couch so he could sit down next to him.

"I'm not —" he let out a half cough, half burp, "—a lightweight." And then his head flopped back on the couch and he sighed, closing his eyes.

"Sure, kid." Delzy chuckled. "Why aren't you out there dancing? Young hotshot like you should be having fun." He nudged Shane suggestively.

"I dunno," Shane slurred. "I'm boooring. I'm a good boy, I don't do stuff like 'have fun.'" He used air quotes to emphasize those last two words. "That's what Ilya says."

"Rozanov called you boring?" Delzy huffed.

"Yeah. A couple of times actually," Shane laughed now, too drunk to be embarrassed about the smile that spread across his face while he thought back to their conversations.

"Looks like he's having fun out there." Delzy looked at Shane when he said it.

Shane rolled his eyes, even though they were still closed. "Soooo much fun. His tongue was halfway down that girl's throat."

"I'm sure you could have your tongue down some girl's throat if you

wanted in 2 minutes." Shane opened his eyes and tilted his head to the side to look at Delzy, who didn't take his eyes off Shane, and seemed to be waiting for his reaction.

Shane rolled his eyes again. "Sure. Yeah. Great. That's exactly what I need." His tone was sarcastic and a little whiny.

"Yeah, me either," Delzy sighed, finally looking back at the crowd.

Shane slowly lifted his head from the back of the couch to look at Delzy more intently. Did he mean…? What Shane thought he meant?

"Like… you don't wanna kiss some random girl in a club?"

"I don't want to kiss any girl, Hollander."

Shane's eyes widened and he blinked slowly, processing Delzy's words as fast as he could in his inebriated state, which wasn't very fast.

"You mean…" Shane couldn't say the words.

"Isn't that what you mean?" Delzy looked at him knowingly.

"I… I don't know." Shane was suddenly really sad. He really didn't know. He didn't know why he didn't want to make out with a girl on the dancefloor like Ilya. He didn't know why he was so annoyed about Ilya doing that. He didn't know… except he did. And it seemed Delzy did too. And, incredibly, *he understood.*

While they sat there, letting Shane's words linger between them, Shane spotted Ilya again. He was holding the hand of the girl he'd been dancing with, leading her toward the exit. He leaned down to whisper something in her ear and she giggled, and then they were gone.

Jealousy and disappointment roiled in Shane's gut, his heart sinking. It's not like he was expecting anything to happen between him and Ilya. Of course not. But seeing him leave with that girl, knowing what they were going to do, threw Shane's feelings into sharp relief.

Delzy put his arm around Shane, who probably looked like he was about to cry. He definitely *felt* like he was about to cry. Which would be absolutely mortifying and would solidify his reputation as the baby he feared everyone already thought he was.

"Listen bud, I told you that you could come to me for anything. This

counts as anything. And I just, uh, just shared something with you that not a lot of people know. Only one or two guys on the team who've been around forever like me. Okay?"

Shane understood. This was a conversation just between them. And that's exactly how Shane wanted it to stay.

"Okay," Shane nodded.

"Good." Delzy squeezed his arm. "And when you figure out whatever you're figuring out, you can come talk to me, all right?"

Shane nodded again.

"And one piece of advice? Don't go barking up the wrong tree. You might fall off and get hurt. And it might ruin your professional relationship with the tree." Delzy laughed, more to himself than Shane. "Trust me, I know."

Shane blinked away the tears that had started to form in his eyes.

"Yeah. You're right," He sighed and drained the beer he had left. "Can I go back to the hotel now? Or do I have to keep having fun?" Shane groaned, making it clear he wasn't having any fun at all.

Delzy laughed in earnest now. "Let's get a cab, I can't let you go back by yourself like this." And he pulled Shane up by his elbows, waved to the guys at the table nearby, gesturing to Shane to let them know they were leaving, and they all laughed too.

Delzy delivered him back to his room and dumped Shane into his bed fully dressed, leaving the room's small garbage can next to the bed in case Shane puked, and a bottle of water on the nightstand.

Shane didn't puke, but once Delzy was gone, he undressed, got himself under the covers, and cried himself to sleep.

Chapter 2: Ilya Interlude #1

Chapter Summary

> While I work on Chapter 2, here's a little Ilya POV Interlude!
>
> Shane's POV comes much easier to me, so I don't think I'll do a full Ilya POV chapter. But I'll try to sprinkle interludes like this between the main chapters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything about Shane Hollander made Ilya feel like his brain was unspooling and he was constantly having to reel it back in. Shane took Ilya's carefully crafted persona, the mask he had been wearing since he was 12, and made it feel more like chipped porcelain than the iron he thought it was. And it scared the fuck out of him. But he couldn't stop himself from needing to be in Shane's presence. They were constantly drifting toward each other, and staying away was like swimming against a riptide. But it didn't stop Ilya from trying.

It didn't help that Shane was the best damn hockey player Ilya had ever seen. Ilya played against the best of the best in Russia, and compared to Shane, those guys looked like beer league losers. Compared to himself too, but that was to be expected.

Beyond his need to get the fuck away from his father and brother, Ilya had *needed* to be in the NHL. He needed to compete at this level and he needed a teammate who could match his skill and speed (almost) and challenge him to be even better. And Shane Hollander was probably the only person on earth who could do that. And nothing got Ilya going like great hockey.

And yet, Shane was also the most eager little boyscout, sweet and a bit naive, desperate to please, and obviously obsessed with Ilya. It made his blood run hot and his fingers itch to take possession and say *mine.*

Whenever they were alone for too long, Ilya's resolve started to crumble, especially if he let his eyes linger too long on the freckles dappled across Shane's cheeks and nose, or let himself wonder how it might feel to run his hands through Shane's hair — he just *knew* it would feel like silk between his fingers.

He felt crazy. He had never had this reaction to anyone before, men or women — and he'd fucked plenty of both. Ilya had this almost insatiable craving to corrupt that good boy exterior, to take Shane apart and reveal the longing that simmered just beneath the surface, to give him whatever he needed. There were a few close calls, starting that first night in the hotel gym, then again in the hotel elevator in Boston.

So, Ilya did what he did best. He buried the feeling and had meaningless sex. Great sex, of course, because he was great at sex. But completely meaningless, and it had to stay that way. He couldn't allow himself to get attached to anyone, attachment only led to disappointment and loneliness. He'd cut it off at the pass, choose loneliness first, so it was *his* choice — no one could leave him if he chose to be alone.

But Shane Hollander was *always there.* Ilya couldn't get away from him. They were together in the gym, at practice, on buses and planes and on the ice. So when Shane offered to ask about switching roommate assignments — which, of course he did, always the first to try to solve a problem and be helpful, the fucker — Ilya had to put his foot down. No way could they room together. Just the thought of Shane showering while Ilya lay in the hotel bed waiting for him was enough to make his dick swell. The reality of it could only be worse. There's no way Ilya had the restraint necessary to be alone in a room with Shane dripping wet in only a towel. He was grateful Shane seemed to always shower last after practices and games, it gave Ilya the chance to escape.

He simply had to ignore the way the light in Shane's eyes dimmed and his voice went dull when Ilya rejected his offer. And then he had to find a hot girl to fuck the thoughts of Shane right out him. That was the only way he'd survive this season.

Chapter End Notes

So as you can see, Ilya is what the kids are calling "down bad." Until chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Thank you so much to everyone who read and commented on Chapter 1 and Ilya Interlude #1! I'm a bit overwhelmed, in a good way. I am hoping to post updates weekly, but may have to take a break toward the end of August for my wedding 😬
>
> HUGE GIANT MASSIVE thank you to Paupy and Nico for helping me sort through my thoughts and for all your feedback and encouragement! I would never have the confidence to post this without y'all.
>
> Oh, and we're getting to the E rating a bit in this chapter (don't get too excited).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By early December, the Centaurs were on a hot streak. They had won 19 of their first 26 games, which was the team's best start to the season in a decade. Shane had 17 goals, Ilya had 20. Ilya had been moved up to the first line, Shane to the second, and everything felt like it was starting to click into place. Like everything Shane had been working for was finally becoming his reality.

Despite Shane and Ilya's budding friendship, Shane was trying to keep his distance, trying to heed Delzy's warning to not "go barking up the wrong tree," as he put it. But it wasn't easy. During practice, Ilya loved getting a rise out of Shane, challenging him to races and agility challenges, to see who was the "best rookie," often joking that it definitely wasn't Hayden. Shane tried not to laugh, but it wasn't *un* true.

Shane just couldn't resist trying to prove himself. Ilya could say, "I bet you can't take a bite out of a puck," and Shane would probably try it — if it meant getting laughs or praise from his teammate.

They were both already being talked about as the potential Rookie of the Year, and despite being on the same team, Shane enjoyed a bit of friendly competition. He knew that whoever got the award, the competition would only make them both better, and it would only mean good things for the team. During games, Ilya was always the loudest to cheer when Shane scored and the first to pat Shane on the

helmet reassuringly if something didn't go well. Shane tried to do the same, and every time Ilya got a goal or an assist, or even just made a good pass, Shane felt a surge of pride.

Eventually, they were both playing so well that their coach occasionally put them on the power play together, shifting Shane to right wing. When they got to play together, it was fucking electric. They had a connection that was undeniable — Shane felt like he could read Ilya's mind, knew exactly where he was going to be so he could pass the puck without even looking.

In one particularly brutal home game against Dallas that went to double overtime, Shane got the assist on Ilya's goal to win the game, and it felt like they had won the Stanley Cup, he was so happy. Ilya roared with triumph and wrapped his arms around Shane to lift him in the air in celebration. The moment felt like it lasted for hours, Shane looking down at Ilya's joyful face, feeling his arms tightly squeezing Shane's waist, goosebumps fizzing across his skin, even through all the layers of pads and fabric.

In about 2 seconds, the rest of the team was on top of them, and Ilya let Shane down to join the group celebration. But Shane felt dazed, breathing heavily not just from the long game they just played, but also from the thrill of being wrapped up and lifted in Ilya's arms like that. He couldn't help but think about how it would feel without all the layers of gear, which was a very dangerous train of thought.

The adrenaline pumping through Shane's veins clouded his judgment enough that he was convinced to go out to the bar with the team to celebrate after the game. But that only led to Shane watching Ilya flirt with girls all night, giving them the sly grins and soft touches that Shane longed to be the recipient of, and eventually leaving with one of them — a beautiful girl with long dark hair and freckles.

He watched them leave, and when Shane turned to grab his coat, he noticed Delzy staring at him with a pitying look in his eyes. Shane needed to be less obvious, he was going to get himself in trouble if anyone other than their captain saw him looking at Ilya like that.

Shane let his gaze linger as Delzy turned back to the guy he was talking to. Shane didn't recognize him. They were standing close, and they kept touching each other on the arm or the shoulder, and he saw Delzy order them both another round of drinks on his tab. No one else seemed to notice the way that guy's hand lingered on their captain's hip when he laughed, but Shane did.

Delzy caught Shane staring, said something to his companion, and walked over to him.

Shane sighed. “Whatever mentorly advice you’re about to impart on me, I don’t need it.”

“Damn, Hollander, can’t a guy say hello?”

“Hello.” Shane monotoned.

“Hello,” Delzy repeated mockingly.

“Well?” Shane asked, “Are you going to tell me to not go barking up the wrong tree again?”

“No. I’m going to tell you that you played a hell of a game tonight.”

“Oh,” Shane felt stupid for having such a chip on his shoulder. “Thank you. You did too.”

“I know,” Delzy replied. “I’m also going to tell you that you and Rozanov have something special out on the ice. You might consider switching to right wing. With the two of you on the first line together, I think we could do some real damage.”

Shane didn’t know how to react to that. His gut instinct was to protest. He was a center. Always had been, always would be, he thought. He also knew that staying at center meant he and Ilya would always be in competition, and it was much more likely that one of them would get traded in the next couple of years so the team could build more bench depth in other positions.

“I’ll think about it, I guess I can talk to coach about it.” Shane said thoughtfully. “But why are you telling me this now? Looked like you were in the middle of something.” Shane gestured with his chin over to the guy Delzy had been talking to, who was trying to look like he wasn’t watching them.

“Ah, he’s not going anywhere,” Delzy chuckled.

Shane hesitated a minute, making sure no one was close enough to hear them over the loud din of the bar. “So you’re just like… talking to a guy in front of the whole team like that?”

“Yeah, bud. I am. Look at these idiots,” he gestured around the room at the rest of their teammates. “They’re not paying any attention,

they're either drunk, distracted, or both. And if you didn't know what you were seeing, you wouldn't notice either."

Shane thought about that for a second, realizing Delzy was totally right. If Delzy hadn't semi-come-out to him, Shane wouldn't even know to be looking for signs he was flirting with a guy. So he worked up the courage to ask another, more embarrassing question.

"So… do you think anyone else has noticed, um, me? Looking. At… you know?"

"Fuck no, Hollander. Don't worry about that. You need to worry about what you're doing with whatever you've got going on, not what these dumbasses are thinking about you."

Shane sighed with relief. That was good. Ever since that night in the club, he was worried that everyone on the team could tell he was completely obsessed with Ilya. And maybe they could, but Delzy had reassured him that they wouldn't be interpreting his obsession accurately.

"What the fuck do I do, Delzy?" Shane asked, putting his elbows on the bar and holding his head in his hands.

"I dunno. Maybe try being his friend?"

"What?" Shane was not expecting that response at all. "Like, spend *more* time with him?"

Delzy shrugged, "Can't be worse than it is now, right? You guys are going to have to work together for at the very least a few years, probably more, and you need to learn how to function around him." Delzy made himself laugh, and Shane huffed in annoyance.

"You live with Pike, right?" he asked.

Shane nodded.

"Then hang out with Roz and Pikey, that will diffuse the tension. Rookie bonding or whatever."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense." Shane still didn't think it was wise to have Ilya in his home, like, where his *bed* was. But the thought of it was thrilling, and Delzy probably knew a lot more than Shane did about navigating this kind of thing. "Thanks, Delzy."

Shane leaned in awkwardly, going for a bro-hug but Delzy pushed him away lightly, smiling, and said, “Hey man, I don’t want my friend over there to get the wrong idea.”

Shane rolled his eyes and gathered up his coat, watching Delzy go back to his “friend” with a twinge of envy. But also with a new determination to get his feelings under control and become Ilya’s friend.

***

Shane and Hayden had settled into their living situation a little better by December. Shane was adjusting to Hayden’s chaotic way of living, resigned to closing all the kitchen cabinet doors behind him and collecting dirty cereal bowls from the living room. He was so grateful they didn’t have to share a bathroom. And Hayden was trying really hard to not mess with Shane’s routines — he knew to not touch Shane’s food in the refrigerator or use his toothpaste and leave the tube squeezed just in the middle. Both of them were trying to learn to compromise. Shane thought this must be what having a brother was like — kind of annoying, but also nice to have someone to hang out with and do stuff with on days off.

He did occasionally hear Hayden in his room with a girl, which he would really really rather not have to hear, but Shane felt too uncomfortable about it to say anything. He started watching loud action movies in his bedroom with his headphones on whenever Hayden had a “date.” And after hearing how thin their walls were, Shane only ever jerked off in the shower, mortified at the idea of Hayden overhearing him.

And even though Shane was never bringing anyone over for anything sexual or romantic, he thought it only fair that he be allowed to have guests over too. So, despite Hayden’s protests and following Delzy’s advice, Shane invited Ilya over to their apartment to play videogames the afternoon of the first day of a rare two day stretch without a game or travel.

“Why don’t you want to hang out with him?” Shane pressed when Hayden said he would leave for the afternoon.

“I dunno, he’s so… he always acts like I’m stupid or something.”

“Bud, you’re not the smartest…” Shane started with a laugh.

“Shut up! You know what I mean! He’s always chirping me or

whatever, but in a mean way, not a fun way." Hayden looked pleadingly at Shane.

"He does that with everyone! Maybe you guys just need to hang out more, you know, not for hockey stuff." Shane tried to persuade him.

"Easy for you to say, he's always riding your dick during practice, like you fucking invented hockey or something."

Shane nearly spit out the ginger ale he was drinking, and instead started choking on it, at the thought of, uh, what Hayden said.

"Whoa, buddy, drink much?" Hayden patted him on the back.

Shane cleared his throat with a few more coughs. "Look, Hayd, I'm trying to be his friend. he seems lonely."

"Lonely?! That guy is like the loudest person in every room. And he's fucking a different chick every night, maybe more than one!"

Shane blushed at that. "I mean, he doesn't seem to have a lot of *friends* , like outside of games and practice. We're all rookies, we should stick together."

"Fiiiiine," Hayden sighed, giving in. "But I'm not taking any of his shit lying down. If he's on my back all day, I'm gonna say something."

"Whatever, I doubt it will be an issue," Shane rolled his eyes. "But thank you. He should be here soon anyway."

Turns out, it was an issue. They were playing Mario Kart, and Ilya kept shooting all his shells at Hayden, laughed when Hayden came last (which was every race), and chirped him the whole time they were playing. He chirped Shane a bit too, but not nearly as much.

"You are slower in this game than on the ice!" Ilya teased him again, and Shane couldn't help but laugh. Hayden had a lot of strengths as a player, but speed wasn't one of them.

"Seriously, Shane, you're laughing too?!" Hayden was getting genuinely pissed off, but Shane couldn't stop laughing.

"It's just a joke, Hayd!"

"Easy for you to say, Roz isn't calling out your weak backhand!"

"Hey! I'm working on that, jeez." Shane stopped laughing. That was

just rude.

Ilya elbowed him lightly, “Is right, your backhand is weak.” He chuckled and winked at Shane, making Shane smile and his cheeks heat. Fortunately Hayden seemed too angry to notice Shane blushing. Ilya definitely noticed though.

“Oh, so you’re mad when I say it, but he gets a pass?”

“I mean, I do need to work on my backhand…” Shane said sheepishly, still smiling at Ilya.

Hayden threw his arms up in defeat. “You know what? Fuck this! I guess Roz is your new best friend, not me! I’m done.”

Hayden stomped off down the hall to his bedroom, leaving Shane and Ilya staring after him, the menu music looping in the background. Interrupting the tension that hung in the air, Ilya turned back to Shane and spoke.

“We know each other longer anyway, right Hollander?”

Shane’s throat was suddenly dry, and he was keenly aware of how close their knees were on the couch. Neither of them had ever brought up that night in the hotel gym in Regina. But the memory was crystal clear in Shane’s mind, and it made his heart beat faster knowing that Ilya remembered it too.

“Right.” He didn’t mean to whisper it, but he did.

They held eye contact, not daring to move, but heat was building between them. They stayed that way, simply looking at each other, for what felt like minutes. Shane moved first, licking his lips and looking away, a small smile tugging at his lips.

Ilya moved his pinky the half inch needed to reach the side of Shane’s hand on the couch. It sent a jolt of lightning up through Shane’s arm, he snapped his gaze back to Ilya. Ilya’s eyes were wide, questioning. Shane had never seen him look so innocent, so vulnerable, the usual arrogant veneer gone from his features. Shane opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Hayden crashed back into the room.

“You know what, Roz, I don’t know why we’re even fighting, we’re supposed to be on the same team, man!” His voice was high and agitated, even though it sounded like he was trying to clear the air.

Shane was relieved, but also supremely annoyed by Hayden's terrible timing.

Ilya sighed and moved his hand away, saying, "You are right. Is okay, I need to go anyway." Ilya nodded and stood up, then walked toward the door.

Shane wanted to protest, but he really couldn't without giving too much of himself away.

"Pike, tomorrow, we all work out together. Will show you how it is done, okay? We will be friends now, yes?"

Hayden looked flabbergasted, but also pleased. "Okay, yeah, sure bud. But I'm going to show *you* how it's done."

Ilya laughed and rolled his eyes. He looked back at Shane, who hadn't moved an inch, hand stuck in the spot where it was when Ilya touched it, and he gave Shane the smallest quirk of a smile, the tiniest acknowledgment of the moment they just shared. And maybe seeking acknowledgment that he was making an effort to get along with Hayden. "See you tomorrow, Hollander."

Shane couldn't speak, he was holding too much in, so he just nodded, returning Ilya's smile. Hayden grumbled about Ilya for the rest of the day, and he was on Shane's mind too, but for very different reasons.

All Shane could think about was the feeling of Ilya's pinky touching the side of his hand. He felt the heat radiating off of that spot as if Iya's pinky was a lit match that left a burn in its wake. For the first time, Shane felt like maybe he hadn't been misinterpreting anything, maybe Ilya really did want to kiss him. That miniscule gesture, the unguarded way Ilya held Shane's gaze, and especially the acknowledgment of their first meeting, all led to the inevitable conclusion that Shane's feelings might actually be reciprocated.

But that didn't change the fact that Ilya *was* fucking a different girl every night. Well, maybe it was the same girl sometimes, he didn't know. But he definitely hooked up a lot and it was never with a girlfriend, at least according to their teammates who gossiped about it all the time . So Shane, as usual, was confused. But he didn't think he was so naive that he couldn't read the signals Ilya was so clearly sending him.

When he got in the shower that night, he was still thinking about Ilya, their hands touching, and what might have happened if Hayden

hadn't come back into the room. Maybe if Hayden hadn't been there, Shane would have turned his hand over, inviting Ilya to interlace their fingers. Maybe Shane would have moved over the few inches that separated them and pressed his thigh up against Ilya's. Maybe Ilya would have reached out and put his big hand on Shane's cheek and leaned down, pulling Shane's face closer, until their lips brushed.

Shane was getting hard just thinking about a single kiss. He felt so dirty, but he couldn't fucking help himself. He reached down to start stroking himself slowly, biting his lip to keep from moaning at the mere thought of Ilya touching him.

He imagined swinging his leg over Ilya on the couch, straddling him and putting his hands in Ilya's thick, beautiful curls. Were they as soft as they looked? Shane wanted to run his hands through Ilya's hair so badly, maybe even more than he wanted to kiss him. He kept stroking, speeding up, breaths getting short. He thought about how Ilya lifted him up after scoring that goal against Dallas and imagined being squeezed against him again and grinding down in his lap.

Now, in Shane's mental image, their shirts were gone, and Shane could run his hands over Ilya's strong shoulders, feel Ilya's hands running down Shane's back, cupping his ass. Shane couldn't hold back the moan this time, and he prayed Hayden wasn't in his bedroom, which shared a wall with Shane's bathroom. It became too much when Shane started imagining feeling Ilya's hard cock beneath him, pressing up to rub his length against Shane's, and Shane came with a shudder. He had to lean back on the shower wall to steady himself. This was the first time he'd allowed himself to really imagine Ilya while he jerked off, and it was such a powerful orgasm that Shane had to take a few minutes to gather himself before he could get to washing his hair.

After the reverberations of his pleasure faded away, guilt and shame started to rise in Shane's chest. He had to stop thinking these things about his teammate. Even if there was some reciprocation of feelings, nothing could *ever* happen between them. It would destroy their friendship, and likely destroy their careers.

Shane went to sleep, resolved to get his feelings under control. He needed to focus if he wanted to get the Centaurs to the playoffs, and the distraction of his (he really didn't want to admit this is what it was) crush was going to become a problem.

Unfortunately, the Centaurs travel coordinator, Bill, had other ideas.

Because when they arrived at the hotel in San Jose for their west coast road trip two days later, he came up to Shane and Ilya with key cards, and said, “You two are together for this trip.”

Hayden’s jaw dropped, aghast. “What the hell? Shane and I always room together.”

“Sorry, Pike, that’s how it shook out this time,” Bill shrugged at him, continuing to hand out key cards.

Shane walked over and patted Hayden on the shoulder in a consoling gesture. “Sorry, Hayd. But we’re together all the time at home. This is a chance to get to know — who are you with?”

“Lapierre.”

Shane tried not to laugh, knowing Hayden was in for a rough night. “Consider this a chance to get to know Mason better. He’s great, I’m sure he’ll be a good roomie.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Hayden sighed, dragging his bag behind him. “No offense, Mase,” he said, realizing his new roommate had been listening to the whole conversation.

They walked away, and Shane was left standing next to Ilya, realizing that he now had to spend the entire night with the one man he needed to stay the farthest away from.

But he had a sneaking suspicion that this wasn’t just “how it shook out” like Bill said.

Shane looked up at Ilya, eyes squinting in accusation, “Did you request a roommate change after all?”

Ilya just shrugged and winked at Shane, and then walked off behind Hayden and Lapierre to the elevator bank.

Shane laughed quietly, and tried to suppress the thrill that spiked in his gut at the thought of Ilya actually asking Bill to room him with Shane. Maybe he just needed to get away from the snoring, but Shane didn’t care. He was totally fucked, but he couldn’t bring himself to mind *that* much, knowing Ilya actually wanted to be his roommate.

They were both quiet as they took their suits out to hang in the closet, put their toiletries in the bathroom, and sat down on their beds. Shane definitely felt tension in the air, and he didn’t know how to address it.

But, as usual when Shane was wrapped up in the tangle of anxiety in his brain, Ilya spoke first.

“Do not tell Lapierre, okay?”

Shane laughed, “So you did ask to switch!”

“Yes. But told Bill not to say anything, do not want to hurt his feelings.”

“Yeah, totally, that’s smart.”

“Sorry to hurt Hayden’s feelings.” Ilya said with a grin.

“No you’re not.” Shane laughed and tossed a pillow from his bed at Ilya. Ilya caught it and immediately threw it back at Shane, who didn’t react quick enough and got whacked in the head by the pillow. They both dissolved into laughter, Shane falling backwards on his bed with a sigh.

He heard Ilya flop back on his bed too, and they both lay there quietly for a minute, letting the travel fatigue take over.

Eventually, Shane turned his head to the right, and found Ilya looking back at him from his bed.

“I hope you get a better sleep tonight.” Shane said softly.

Ilya sighed heavily, looking back up at the ceiling. He must really have been suffering sharing a room with Lapierre. Then he said, “Me too.”

Shane continued to look at Ilya, who had closed his eyes, and Shane tracked the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He was so beautiful it almost hurt Shane to keep looking.

“I’m going to walk over to the drugstore to get Hayden some earplugs,” Shane declared, and hopped off the bed.

Ilya laughed softly, “You are too nice, Hollander.”

Yet another half-criticism that felt like a compliment. Shane would take it.

“I just feel bad knowing he has to deal with the snoring. I’ll be back really quick, I don’t want to miss team dinner.”

“Team dinner is terrible.” Ilya sighed, still flat on his back, arms akimbo on the bed.

“It’s not usually that bad,” Shane reasoned.

Ilya dragged himself upright and squinted at Shane, mischief in his eyes. “We should go to McDonalds. Saw it from the bus, is not far to walk.”

“Ew, no, we should have the team meal. Nutritionists put together the menus specifically for athletic performance.”

“Hollander.” Ilya looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“What?” Shane put his hands on his hips and cocked his head to the side.

“You are too good! Always follow the rules! Please. Eat a Big Mac.” Ilya implored. “You will not die.”

“I know I won’t die, but—”

Ilya jumped off the bed then, and interrupted Shane by grabbing both of his biceps in his huge hands.

“No. Not but. Big Mac.” Ilya nodded once as if the matter was settled, slipped on his shoes, and held their room door open with an impatient arm out while Shane just stared at him.

Shane sighed with a smile and trudged out the door, Ilya following close behind. Shane insisted that they stop at the CVS on the corner to get earplugs for Hayden, but then obediently followed Ilya down to the McDonald’s a few blocks away. Shane couldn’t believe he was letting Ilya cajole him into this, normally he was extremely disciplined with his eating. In anticipation of his first NHL season, Shane had met with a sports nutritionist to get a basic meal plan set up so he could optimize his performance. It wasn’t super strict, and he could still eat most of what his parents cooked at home, but McDonald’s was definitely not included in the plan.

“Do you eat a lot of McDonald’s?” Shane asked, walking a little faster to catch up with Ilya’s 6’3” strides.

“Sometimes.” Ilya shrugged. “Is good breakfast.”

“You know it’s, like, terrible for you, right?”

“I play hockey, remember? Burn all the calories.”

“But you need to fuel your body!”

Ilya stopped and turned to Shane in the middle of the sidewalk and sighed, “Shane. I cannot take this. Life is to enjoy! Not for to be a hockey robot! McDonald’s is *fine.* Look at me, I am fastest in the NHL. And I eat McDonalds. Shut up about healthy. Enjoy with me, please.”

Ilya had a genuinely pleading look in his eyes, as if he were begging Shane to not jump into oncoming traffic, and Shane didn’t know how to feel. But he loved — *loved* — the way Ilya said “enjoy with me” like this was about more than just a hamburger and fries. Shane realized he’d been complaining the whole way over instead of appreciating the time they were spending together. Time Shane cherished and often fantasized about, wondering what it would be like to just *hang out* with Ilya. This was the moment, and he was missing it.

“You’re right,” He nodded as he spoke. “I’m being dumb. Let’s get a fucking Big Mac.”

Ilya shook his shoulder and smiled, “Yes, Hollander! Will be so good, you will not regret.”

He started walking backwards, pointing at Shane, “Fries and milkshake too!”

Shane jogged to catch up again, laughing, “Can I get a ginger ale instead?”

Ilya grinned back at him and said, “Whatever you want, Hollander.”

Whatever you want, Hollander.

The words echoed in Shane’s head, all the way through their meal, back to the hotel, in the shower, and through his mind as he listened to Ilya’s steady breathing and tried to calm his giddiness enough to sleep.

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They suffered an epic loss in San Jose, 4-0. The team’s mood was somber on the way to Vancouver, but Shane was surprisingly chipper. He could deal with one loss. There were 82 games after all, and no team had ever won them all. And okay, maybe his good mood had something to do with his new roommate.

After their McDonald's outing, Shane felt like he and Ilya could really and truly be friends, and it felt like winning the lottery. They had talked the whole time. Shane shared a bit about his parents, growing up in Ottawa, and the time he spent with his Japanese grandmother before she passed away when he was 12. And Ilya talked more that night than Shane had ever heard him before. Mostly about the differences between Russian and North American life — hockey, school, food, music — and Shane listened with rapt attention, soaking in whatever Ilya would give him. He didn't say anything about his family, besides a brief mention of an older brother, and Shane remembered how Ilya's parents hadn't been with him the day he was drafted. He was so curious, but he wasn't bold enough to ask. Shane figured Ilya would share what he was comfortable with, and he didn't want to overstep.

That night in their room in Vancouver, they were much quieter. Shane was thinking through every play from their game, trying to figure out what went wrong, where he could have been better, and what changes he needed to make for their game the next day. He imagined Ilya was doing the same.

When Ilya got out of the shower, Shane exerted a tremendous amount of energy trying not to stare at the smattering of dark hair across his broad chest, or the way his shoulders rippled as he rubbed his hair dry with a towel. He didn't totally succeed, though, and Ilya might have caught him looking before Shane quickly averted his eyes back to the sports commentators droning on the TV.

"You want to shower?" Ilya asked. Shane turned to respond, and oh jesus fuck, Ilya had asked that at the same time he dropped his towel. Shane thanked whatever gods he could think of that Ilya's back was to him — he didn't think he'd survive the alternative. Ilya's ass, Shane was unsurprised to learn, was perfect. As were his huge, powerful thighs. Shane's cock twitched and he recoiled internally.

Shane swallowed, and with considerable effort, averted his gaze again.

"Uh. Um. Uh, yeah. I'm going to shower. Do you need anything in the bathroom first?" Shane was still pointedly looking at the TV.

"No. Go ahead."

Shane nodded, grabbed a clean pair or boxer briefs from his bag, and took them into the bathroom with him. He was going to just get

dressed in the bathroom to avoid any potential embarrassment, especially if Ilya was still undressed when he got out. And maybe he needed to take care of his um, excitement, in the shower so he could return to the room without making a fool of himself.

The mirror was still foggy from Ilya's shower, and it gave the bathroom a sauna-like feeling. Which, for some reason, felt a little sexy. And Shane couldn't help thinking about Ilya in here only minutes before, naked, warm water running down his perfect body. Did Ilya touch himself in the shower? Did he need to get off as badly as Shane did?

Shane allowed his mind to wander as he dipped his head under the spray of the shower and started washing his hair. He imagined what it would feel like to have Ilya in here with him, Shane's back pressed against his solid chest while Ilya massaged the shampoo into his scalp. He felt himself hardening as he thought of Ilya winding his hands down Shane's chest, gently cleaning him, and then letting a hand dip lower to take Shane's hard length in his hand. Shane mimicked the movement himself, sighing with pleasure, then biting his lip. He hoped the TV was loud enough to muffle any sounds.

He thought about what it might feel like to have Ilya's hard cock pressed up against his ass. He knew Ilya was big, he could tell when he was wearing those loose sweatpants, and the thought of feeling him there made Shane's spine tingle, and he came hard and unexpectedly with a grunt. He quickly washed himself off and tried to think back to their loss tonight. It was a bummer, but it was effective in taking his mind off of Ilya's ass.

He opened the bathroom door to find Ilya fully dressed in basketball shorts and a t-shirt, much to Shane's relief. He quickly dressed himself and sat on his bed. He needed to get his shit together and be *normal.*

"Anything good on TV?" Shane asked casually as he could for someone who just jerked off to the thought of the man sitting on the bed next to his.

"Not really. But am not tired yet." Ilya sighed.

"You're not going to go out?" Shane asked, cautiously. He'd heard from Lapierre that Ilya would often leave for a hookup on nights before an off day on road trips.

"No." Ilya scoffed. "Where am I going in Vancouver?"

“Oh, um, I dunno. Nevermind.” Shane shook his head slightly. To fill the awkward silence, he asked, “Want to watch a movie? I have some saved on my iTunes. I just got the latest James Bond from a couple years ago.”

“Yes, sounds good,” Ilya launched that diabolically charming half-smile at him.

Shane got up to grab his laptop, planning to pull the desk chair between their beds and place the laptop there so they could both kind of see it. But as he grabbed it out of his bag, Ilya got up and plopped himself against the headboard of Shane’s bed.

Oh.

Trying to breathe normally, Shane took his computer back to the bed with him. He could sit on the same bed as Ilya Rozanov and watch a movie in the dim light of their shared hotel room, after coming in the shower thinking about his naked body. He could absolutely do that and be completely normal about it. He would *not* get a boner, and it would be a totally normal friend activity.

He sat as far away from Ilya as he comfortably could on a double bed with two NHL players and a laptop between their legs, pulling up the movie. They didn’t talk anymore after that, letting Daniel Craig lull them into a comfortable silence. It was a good movie, but Shane was realizing quickly how tired he was. He reluctantly moved a little closer to the center of the bed to get more comfortably settled on his pillows, and Ilya did the same.

Their arms were almost touching now, and Shane was quickly losing track of the plot of the movie. He was more focused on the static electricity humming in the inches between their shoulders and the way Ilya was absentmindedly grazing his fingernails over his knee. Shane would give anything to reach out and replace Ilya’s hand with his own and gently caress the exposed skin there.

His eyes started drifting closed, focused on the steady rhythm of Ilya’s fingers moving back and forth, back and forth. He decided to just close his eyes for a second, he’d already seen the movie, he just needed a minute to be able to focus again.

The next time Shane opened his eyes, the laptop screen was black, the room was dark but for the lamp on the desk, and he felt a comforting warmth on the left side of his body.

He must have fallen asleep. Next to Ilya. He fell asleep next to Ilya… oh shit, he's cuddling with Ilya.

It took him a beat, but Shane realized that the warmth he felt was from Ilya's shoulder under his head, and Ilya's head gently leaning onto Shane's. He then realized his neck was in a very uncomfortable position, and if he stayed like this, he'd have a strained muscle, so he gently started lifting his head. This made Ilya jerk awake, snapping his head up and looking around wildly. He mumbled something in Russian, and then looked at Shane, and realization dawned on his face.

"Oh. Shane." He shook his head a little, shaking his rumpled curls, making Shane's heart clench.

"We fell asleep." Shane said, sheepishly. "Sorry I kinda fell asleep *on* you."

"Is okay," Ilya grumbled.

Ilya looked blearily at him, blinking fast a few times to clear his head. He looked so unlike his usual self, soft and youthful, and Shane was at risk of doing something very stupid like reaching a hand out and brushing the hair out of his face.

Shane was saved by the sound of a phone vibrating on the desk, which must have been Ilya's, because he rolled off the bed and went to grab it. He sighed heavily and rolled his eyes when he saw whoever it was who was calling, then gestured to the bathroom with the phone in his hand.

"Sorry," Ilya said as he closed the bathroom door behind him.

Shane thought about trying to eavesdrop, but when he heard Ilya's muffled voice, it was in gruff Russian. Shane wondered if it was someone from Ilya's family calling, maybe his parents? He decided to let it go and let Ilya have his privacy as much as he could. He shut the laptop and put it back in his bag, then pulled out his own phone, glad for the reminder to text his parents and say goodnight.

By the time Ilya emerged from the bathroom, Shane was under the covers watching another sports commentary show on a low volume.

"Sorry," Ilya mumbled again.

"No problem, it's your room too. I could have left if you needed

privacy."

Ilya rolled his eyes again, "No no, just my stupid brother. Do not need privacy for him."

"Well, I don't understand Russian, so you had it anyway," Shane offered, trying to earn back the soft smile Ilya had worn before the phone call.

Ilya just sighed, and Shane decided to be brave.

"What did your brother want?"

"Money. Always money."

"Oh… Are you guys close?"

Ilya laughed humorlessly, "Fuck no."

"Oh, um, sorry, I shouldn't have pried," Shane grimaced.

Ilya sat on the side of his bed, facing Shane, who was still lying down, and sighed with resignation, "Is okay. My brother… he is older. He only wants money. We do not talk, only when he needs money."

"That really sucks." Shane sat up and faced Ilya. "Can I ask… and tell me to shut up if I'm, like, crossing a boundary or whatever. But, um, what about your parents?"

There was that humorless laugh again. "My father, he is same as my brother. We do not talk when I am away from Russia."

Shane just nodded, waiting. He didn't want to rush Ilya, who was revealing more about himself than he ever had to Shane, and that deserved patience. Shane noticed Ilya reaching for the cross necklace he always wore, rubbing it between his fingers, and biting his lip.

He let out a long breath, then said, looking down, "My mother. She was wonderful. The best. She… she died."

"Oh, Ilya, I'm so sorry." Shane wanted to reach out and hug him, but he didn't know if that would be welcome. Instead, he sat down next to Ilya on his bed and said again, "I'm really really sorry."

Ilya turned his head to look at Shane, the same innocent, vulnerable look in his eyes that he had back at Shane's apartment before Hayden interrupted them. Shane wanted to kiss Ilya *so much* he could burst.

He knew it would be wrong, so wrong, especially right now, when Ilya had just shared something so painful. But all Shane wanted to do was comfort him, hold him, *anything* to be closer.

Instead, he said, “Thank you for telling me about her.”

Ilya swallowed hard, and looked down at his knees again, “Thank you too. For listening.”

And even though they didn’t touch, they just quietly got into their respective beds and turned off the lights, it felt like they had crossed a threshold. Shane suspected Ilya didn’t tell very many people about his family, and it felt significant. He knew it didn’t mean anything romantic, necessarily, but even if nothing like that ever happened, Shane thought Ilya *trusted* him. Shane was determined to protect their friendship and earn the trust Ilya had in him — he wouldn’t ruin it by doing something stupid like trying to kiss him.

***

The Centaurs redeemed themselves in Vancouver with a win, then won again in Calgary, and lost in Chicago before returning to Ottawa, putting them at 21 wins and only 7 losses — the best record in the NHL. Hockey media was losing their minds over it, and who could blame them?

The story was a great one: the worst team in the NHL drafts the two best prospects in over a decade, a Canadian boy-next-door and a charismatic Russian, and they turn the team around instantly, bringing the team into likely playoffs contention for the first time in several years. And on top of that, these fresh young teammates seemed to be great friends. There were videos of them at practice racing and doing agility challenges, and they were always celebrating goals together and laughing on the bench. The NHL couldn’t have written the story better themselves.

The Centaurs wanted to capitalize on the narrative, so they decided to push Shane and Ilya into a press conference before a home game a couple of weeks later, close to the team’s short Christmas break. Shane was used to the post-game scrum, but that was usually pretty easy to do quickly, and he mostly had to answer questions about the game they’d just played. This felt much more formal. He has been media-trained by his agent since he was 16, but Shane was still nervous. Not about the media so much, but about the whole world (or, like, a lot of hockey fans) seeing right through him and knowing that he had the

world's biggest and stupidest crush on his teammate.

Walking into the media room, Ilya had his confident swagger and arrogant smile plastered on his face. And Shane was trying not to throw up. Hopefully they could get this over with quickly. Despite his nerves, Shane was able to pull on his nice-Canadian-boy neutral expression by the time they sat down at the table, and the reporters jumped right in.

"So Shane, there's no question that the Centaurs were expected to improve this year, but I don't think anyone expected the improvement to be so quick and so drastic. Why do you think it's happening like this?"

"Well, I think it's pretty clear that we have great chemistry as a team. You know, with some great veterans like DelZotto leading us, we have figured out how to work together pretty fast. It's a team effort, and we're all putting our best foot forward, being competitive, and, uh, that effort is paying off."

"Ilya, what do you think?'

Ilya looked at Shane with narrowed eyes, as if analyzing him, then turned to his mic and said, "Shane is humble. We have two best centers in the league, Rozanov and Hollander, so we win games. Very simple. Next question?"

Everyone in the room laughed, including Shane, and Shane preened internally at Ilya including him in his estimation of "the best."

"Okay, Ilya, in that case, how do you respond to critics who say that even if you go to the playoffs, you're too young and inexperienced to handle the pressure?"

Ilya rolled his eyes this time, "I played KHL playoffs no problem, I can play NHL playoffs too. Like Shane says, we have veterans like Delzy, we are fine."

"Shane, what do you think?"

"Um, yeah, Ilya has played in the KHL playoffs, which are definitely intense like the NHL. And we have those veterans who have been there, so they can show us the ropes. And also, I would say, I don't mind being underestimated, it just gives us more reason to work hard and prove the critics wrong, you know? So, yes, we are planning to get to the playoffs, and we're planning to play the same way we have been so far this season. We'll prove we're capable."

Shane was feeling much better now, Ilya's easy confidence was boosting Shane's own. Knowing how much Ilya really believed in their team made Shane want to sit up a little straighter and own that assuredness. He was ready for the next question.

"There's a lot of chatter already about Rookie of the Year, and how likely it is that it will go to one of you. We've seen videos of you guys in practice and the little competitions you have. Does that translate to competing for the Calder against each other? You're on the same team, but this is an individual award. Who do you think will get it, between the two of you?"

They were both taken aback by the audacity of the reporter asking that question, even more so by the fact that he asked them while they were together. Ilya looked furious, so Shane jumped in, leaning forward into the mic.

"First of all, I don't know about Ilya, but I'm not playing to get the Calder, I'm playing to get the Stanley Cup. So If a teammate of mine is having the best season of his life, and gets an award for it, it will only help me get closer to my goal. Second, one thing that's great about playing with someone like Ilya is that he challenges me and makes me a better player. So if we're competing in practice — which I know everyone knows we do — it's because we're pushing each other to be better, not because we're trying to one-up each other. Hockey is a game, and we're having fun with it, but we also take it very seriously. We're not going to put our individual accomplishments over the team's success. The suggestion that we would do that is kind of insulting to both of us, and so is asking us this question." Shane took a breath, the room was rapt with attention. "And I'll finish by saying that Ilya absolutely deserves the Calder, and I'll be shocked if he doesn't get it. He's an incredible player and it's an honor to be in the running with him."

The room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Whatever adrenaline had surged angrily through Shane at the reporter's question was dropping fast, and he realized that he just ranted at a room full of cameras from every national and international sports media outlet. He was basically a breath away from telling them to go fuck themselves, and he was as shocked as they were about it.

Ilya cleared his throat, interrupting the silence, and said simply, "Shane will be rookie of the year. He deserves it." He shrugged then said, "Are we finished? We have a game."

There was a ripple of nervous laughter through the group assembled

in front of them, which then broke into a louder chatter. Ilya stood abruptly and tapped Shane's shoulder, urging him to stand as well. They walked out of the room, the Centaurs PR person close behind them.

"Well, boys," she said, looking between them. "It's not what we expected, but I think that went well. Nice work." She nodded curtly at both of them, and walked off in the direction of her office.

Ilya looked at Shane with a bemused look on his face, "Damn Hollander. Very impressive."

Shane's eyes were wide and he laughed nervously, "I don't know what came over me! I've never been that forward with the media, I feel like my agent is going to be furious. But that was *such* a fucking stupid question, and you looked so pissed off, I couldn't hold it in!"

"You said everything right. The clip will be on every TV in Canada, everyone will love it, do not worry." Ilya reassured him. "And thank you. I was too angry to speak English, the words do not translate."

Shane smiled at him, "Of course. And thank you, um," Shane looked down at his feet, bashful, "Thank you for saying I deserve the Calder. That, it, um, that really means a lot to me. Coming from you."

Oh god, Shane was a bumbling fool again now that they were alone in this hallway. He couldn't look at Ilya, didn't want to see his reaction to his blathering. But then Ilya put a hand on his shoulder, radiating warmth through Shane's body, and he looked back up.

"Is the truth," Ilya said seriously.

Shane was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude for the man in front of him. He felt so lucky to have Ilya by his side, as a teammate and friend, going through this bizarre experience with him. After their road trip, and now this, Shane was completely over the moon for Ilya. He knew he couldn't have everything he wanted, but he would take as much as he could, spend as much time with Ilya as he would give him. With the residual adrenaline still coursing through his system, he wanted to do something about it. It gave him the courage to ask something he'd been hemming and hawing about for weeks.

"Do you want to come to my parent's house with me for Christmas?" He blurted out in a messy jumble.

Ilya laughed, "Sorry Hollander, still not so good with English to

understand that. Say again?"

Shane took a breath and asked more slowly, "Do you want to come to my parent's house with me for Christmas? We have dinner and open gifts, it's just the three of us, but it's really nice, and my mom cooks some delicious food and bakes cookies. And I know you can't go back home… and with your family and everything… I just thought, well, I didn't want you to be alone on Christmas."

Ilya's eyes went wide, and Shane couldn't tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Um… yes." Ilya nodded solemnly, but then a smile spread across his face. "Yes, I would like to go to Hollander family Christmas."

Shane breathed a sigh of relief and grinned, "Awesome! It'll be great, I promise. I can even pick you up and drive you so you don't have to find their house."

"Sure, yes, sounds good." Ilya nodded.

They stood there smiling at each other stupidly until someone down the hall yelled, "Hey! Rozanov, Hollander! We have a fucking game to play, or did you forget?"

They snapped out of their shared gaze and hustled down the hall to get ready, but Shane couldn't stop beaming. He was going to spend Christmas with Ilya. Ilya was going to meet his parents! For some reason, that felt *huge* . And it was probably stupid as hell, because they could never be anything more than teammates and friends, and Shane was setting himself up for heartbreak. But at that moment, he thought the heartbreak would be worth it for the chance to have Ilya in his childhood home for Christmas dinner, to get to share that with the person… with the person he wanted to share it with the most.

Chapter End Notes

Another Ilya Interlude is coming, then, Christmas with the Hollanders!

Chapter 4: Ilya Interlude #2

Chapter Summary

Ilya's really going through it. Sorry, buddy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya was fucked. There was nothing else to it. He was fucked, he fucked himself, and there was no way to unfuck his situation without hurting Shane and himself in the process.

On the list of things Ilya shouldn't have done, intentionally dropping his towel so Shane would see his ass ranked pretty high. Lower than getting off hard and fast to the sound of Shane jerking off in the shower right after that, and just above almost kissing Shane on his couch while Hayden fucking Pike was in the other room. But the number one thing he shouldn't have done was say *yes* to going to Christmas dinner at Shane's parents house.

A few more things Ilya shouldn't have done included:

- Working out with Hayden and attempting to be nice to him to make Shane happy
- Lifting Shane after that goal in Dallas and holding on just a little too long
- Asking Bill to switch rooming assignments so he could room with Shane
- Basically going on a date with Shane to McDonalds
- *Don't forget the whole shower and ass-showing thing!*
- Sitting on Shane's bed to watch a movie and then letting Shane fall asleep on him and THEN falling asleep on Shane
- Telling Shane about his fucking father and brother, and even worse, his mother
- Letting Shane be kind to him and comfort him
- Basically revealing how soft he was for Shane in that pointless press conference

He thought that maybe he was a masochist, because he was definitely torturing himself. But maybe he was a sadist, because he knew he was torturing Shane too. He just couldn't fucking help himself. Every time those big, warm, kind eyes looked at him, Ilya was rendered helpless.

Shit, every time he thought about those eyes… Or those freckles… Or that soft, eager smile. He was so completely fucked.

This just wasn't him. He was the guy who fucked his coach's son and his brother's girlfriend. The guy who picked up a girl at a bar and didn't get her name until he had a hand down her pants. And sure, he was still doing those kinds of things, but he was self-aware enough to know that there was a reason he kept going for girls with dark hair and freckles. Ilya was going soft for Shane Hollander, and he hated it.

He didn't even have the heart to tell Shane that Christmas wasn't that important to most people in Russia. December 25 was just another day to him. And the NHL didn't really care that New Year's was the more significant holiday to its Russian players. Not that he had many fond family memories to associate with the holiday anyway.

But Shane was clearly so nervous about asking him, and Ilya was weirdly turned on by the way Shane had shut down that stupid reporter, so his protective barrier was eroded. He let the vulnerable part of himself buried underneath years of being aloof and arrogant peek his head out and say yes to something he desperately wanted. And now he'd have to face the consequences: spending Christmas with Shane and his loving parents, a stark reminder of something he didn't deserve and would never have.

Shit, did this mean he had to get Shane a gift? God, what kind of gift do you get for someone so boring? Socks? He couldn't go empty-handed, his mother would have been horrified if he didn't show basic respect to his hosts. So maybe just a nice bottle of wine for Shane's parents, and that would suffice. He couldn't go giving Shane a Christmas gift and expect anything good to come of it.

The fact that he was even agonizing about getting Shane a gift really drove the point home: Ilya was utterly fucked.

Chapter End Notes

> I am so incredibly grateful for everyone who is reading and commenting on this fic! This fandom is so lovely, I can't express it enough <3 <3 <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Alexa, play "All I Want for Christmas is You" by Mariah Carey.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shane could hardly focus in the days leading up to Christmas. All he could think about was Ilya meeting his parents. He wanted his parents to like Ilya, which was nonsensical, because he honestly didn't care what his parents thought about Hayden or any of his other teammates for that matter. But it felt so important for his parents to see what he saw in Ilya, his talent, his humor, his magnetic personality, all of the things that made Shane absolutely crazy about him.

Well, maybe not all the things. His parents didn't need to know anything about Ilya's arms. Or clavicles. Or thighs. Definitely not his ass — which haunted Shane's dreams.

On Christmas Eve, Shane grabbed his phone to text Ilya to confirm their plans, and he realized he'd never actually texted him before. A little thrill ran through him as he checked off another friendship milestone with Ilya.

He started typing…

Shane: Hey!

Wait no, was the exclamation point too eager?

Shane: Hey.

No, that felt too serious.

Shane: Heyyy

Maybe too flirty?

Shane: Hey!

Yeah whatever, that worked…

Ilya: Hi

He responded immediately and Shane nearly dropped his phone in surprise.

Shane: Just confirming that I'll be there to pick you up tomorrow at 1:45. It should only take about 10 minutes to get to my parents' house

Ilya: Yes, you told me yesterday after the game

Shane: Ha sorry

Ilya: No problem

Shane: I looked up Russian Christmas traditions, I didn't realize that it's not that big a deal over there. So if it's an imposition, you don't have to come.

Ilya: Stop being weird. I said yes. I will come.

Shane: Sorry

Ilya: Stop saying sorry

Ilya: Do not say sorry to that!

Shane: Fine! I'm not sorry. There, happy now?

Ilya: Yes :)

Shane: Cool :) See you tomorrow

Ilya: Oh no, maybe I stay home, nevermind

Shane: Shut up

Ilya: See you tomorrow :P

Shane did an embarrassing little happy dance, then reminded himself to calm the fuck down. But this was probably the most excited he had been for Christmas since he was 10 years old. He was glad Hayden had already left to see his family in Toronto, so he didn't have to worry too much about containing his giddiness.

He went back to his bedroom to make sure all his gifts were ready to go. He'd already insisted on paying off the remainder of the mortgage on his parents' summer cottage as his primary gift, but he wanted to give them something to unwrap. And even though he'd learned that New Years was the big winter holiday in Russia, Shane didn't want

Ilya to be sitting there without any gifts to open. Putting everything in a large tote bag, he grabbed his coat and headed out to his parents' house, for a low-key Christmas Eve dinner. He'd leave the gifts under the tree tonight, but head back to his apartment so he could do his usual gym routine in the morning before picking up Ilya.

At about 1pm on Christmas, Shane started pacing. He'd been ready to go for half an hour, having already worked out, eaten breakfast, showered, run a load of laundry, and reviewed game tape in preparation for their game against Philly the next night.

His fingers were itching to text Ilya again, but he didn't have a reason to. And as if he had willed it into reality, Shane's phone buzzed with a text.

Ilya: What do I wear?

Shane: Nothing fancy. I'm wearing jeans and a sweater.

Ilya: Your parents like wine?

Shane: Yeah, but you don't have to bring anything, really!

Ilya: Yes I have to, would be so rude. You want me to look bad, Hollander?

Shane: No! But my parents are so excited to have you over, don't worry about anything. My mom is going to talk your ear off about hockey.

Ilya: Just like you ;)

Shane had to put his phone down to calm himself just from that wink emoticon. It made him think about Ilya's actual wink, which he deployed generously, and always made Shane melt.

When he pulled up to Ilya's building at 1:45 on the dot, Ilya was standing out front, holding a small paper shopping bag. He wore a stylish leather jacket with a shearling collar, which was probably not warm enough for the frigid day, but looked amazing on him. When Ilya made eye contact with Shane through the windshield, he smiled and nodded, then got in.

"Hey," Shane said nervously, while Ilya buckled his seatbelt.

"I guessed right, knew you would have a boring car," Ilya snarked

while Shane pulled back onto the road.

“This car isn’t boring! It’s nice and practical for the weather.”

“Is boring, Hollander. Practical is boring.”

“So you’re driving around your bright orange Porsche in the snow?”

“I have Porsche SUV for winter.” Ilya grinned at him.

Shane rolled his eyes. “Of course you do. A Jeep is sensible, that’s all.”

“Sensible. I do not know this word. Does it mean boring?”

“Fuck off,” Shane laughed, “Oh wait, no! *Idi na khui.* ”

“You remember your Russian!” Ilya tossed his head back in laughter, making Shane’s face light up. Every time he made Ilya really laugh like that it was like a ray of sunshine coming through a slit between curtains — so intensely bright in comparison to his usual cool sarcasm and snark.

“You still need to teach me more.”

“What you want to say?”

“Hmmm…” Shane thought about it for a moment. Inexplicably, he almost asked how to say “I love you.” Instead, he said, “How do you say, ‘I love your car, Shane?’”

Ilya huffed another laugh, “Do not know. Do not have words in Russian for that.”

This time Shane barked out a laugh, “You’re such a jerk.”

Ilya just shrugged, “You love it.”

Shane smiled, but didn’t respond. He *did* love it. But he couldn’t say that right now and maintain any illusion of emotional distance. So he kept smiling and they spent the last few minutes of the drive in pleasant quiet.

When they arrived, Shane he opened the front door with Ilya lingering behind him, and called out, “Merry Christmas!”

“Hi sweetie! I’m in the kitchen!” He heard his mother’s voice from inside the house. “I can’t stop stirring or the sauce will burn!”

He walked in, gesturing for Ilya to follow and they took off their shoes. Shane took Ilya's coat and hung it up the closet, and said, "Come on in."

The split-level house had stairs leading down from the front door to a cozy den decorated with hockey memorabilia, and stairs leading up to a slightly more formal, but still very comfortable living room with a big fireplace. It was decorated for Christmas with garlands and a large tree in the corner. Christmas music was trilling lightly from a speaker somewhere.

Shane loved this house, it was the place he felt most comfortable, aside from a hockey rink. It was surreal to have Ilya Rozanov standing here in the house he grew up in. His large frame was so out of place — not because Shane thought he didn't belong, but because his two realities were colliding. The current whirlwind of his life in the NHL, in which Ilya was something like an anchor, meeting the comparatively quiet existence of his childhood, which now felt eons away.

Before Shane could get too caught up in his thoughts, Yuna Hollander walked out of the kitchen, untying her apron and dropping it on the counter behind her. She hugged Shane and said, "Merry Christmas, Shane," with a kiss to his cheek, then turned to Ilya, who was quietly observing with a timid look on his face Shane had never seen before.

"Ilya Rozanov!" Shane's mom beamed up at him, as he was almost a foot taller than her, and placed a welcoming hand on his arm. "It's an honor to have you in our home!"

He smiled that charming smile of his and said, "Is my honor to be here, thank you for having me." He reached into the paper shopping bag he'd carried in with him and pulled out a fancy-looking bottle of red wine and handed it to Yuna.

She took the bottle and said, "Oh, you are so kind, you really didn't need to bring anything."

At that moment, they felt a gust of cold air as Shane's dad entered the kitchen through the sliding glass door onto the back desk, a bundle of firewood held in one hand.

"David, Shane and Ilya are here!" Yuna called back to him.

Shane's dad dropped the bundle of wood, shaking a bit of snow off of himself, and said, "Perfect, just in time for me to get the fire going."

He walked over with a hand outstretched to shake Ilya's. "Thank you for joining us, Ilya, we're so glad Shane invited you."

"Thank you, sir. Very nice to meet you." Ilya nodded.

David hugged Shane, and Yuna told Shane to show Ilya around while they finished preparing the meal, then they stepped back into the kitchen.

"So, this is Shane Hollander's parents," Ilya nodded.

"Don't you dare say they're boring." Shane smirked at him.

"Would never!" Ilya said with a tone of great offense. "And remember, boring is not bad. Just you." He winked.

Shane rolled his eyes and asked, "Do you want a tour?"

Ilya shrugged, "Sure."

"Come on, I'll show you my room." Shane tried not to let his voice falter when he said it, but his throat was going dry as he led Ilya down the hall.

"Here's a bathroom, if you need it," he waved at a door to the right, "This is a guest room," he gestured to the left, "My parents' room is over there, and this is mine."

Shane opened the door, heart beating hard in his chest as if he were doing something much more dangerous than showing his old bedroom to a friend.

If having Ilya in the living room was surreal, then his presence in Shane's bedroom was absolutely dreamlike. In fact, Shane may have actually dreamt about this before, although the end of the dream was very different from how this was going to go.

A double bed sat against the far wall, made up with a simple black comforter and some white throw pillows. The walls featured a framed jersey from Shane's team Canada juniors team, some framed photos of Japan, and a couple of older Centaurs posters, one of which, he now remembered with embarrassment, featured Delzy from early in his career.

Ilya walked in, still carrying the brown paper bag, even though he'd given Shane's parents the wine he brought. Looking around with

curiosity, he plopped himself down on the edge of Shane's bed, and Shane's brain short-circuited. Ilya was sitting on his bed. Where he slept. For years. Where he occasionally fantasized about the night they first met and Ilya's sweaty body and labored breathing… and yeah, bringing him in here was a mistake.

Ilya interrupted his train of thought when he suddenly jumped up and pointed at the poster directly across from the bed.

"This is Delzy!" Ilya declared with delight. "Hollander! You have your captain on your wall? This is so sweet! You told him, yes?"

"Oh my god, NO." Shane insisted. "I totally forgot that was even there! I got that poster as a gift, I didn't even think about it until now. Ugh, you're going to tell him, aren't you?"

"Of course," Ilya smirked. "Delzy needs to know a stalker is on his team!"

"Ilya, seriously, I am *not* a stalker! I was just a fan, I grew up here, so I'm a Centaurs fan!"

"Sure sure." Ilya shook his head in mock disapproval.

Now it was Shane's turn to flop down on the bed. "I should never have brought you here," he signed.

Shane leaned back on the bed and propped up on his elbows as Ilya continued to poke around. He turned back to Shane and took a step closer so that he was looming over Shane on the bed.

"No. Is great, I am so happy to see your room, Hollander." Ilya seemed sincere, not sarcastic, and it took Shane's breath away.

He stared up at Ilya, realizing they were in a very suggestive position, and Ilya's eyes flared with heat. He could so easily lean down over Shane on the bed and press him into the mattress in one quick motion. Shane's breaths became heavy, wishing Ilya would.

A second later, he nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard his mom shout from down the hall, "Come get some food, boys!"

They both turned their heads towards the door, and Shane took the opportunity of Ilya looking away from him to jump up from the bed.

"Let's eat." He smiled brightly, hoping to mask anything else his face

might be doing.

The meal was delicious and passed with surprising ease. As expected, Yuna spent most of the meal talking to Ilya about hockey: asking him about his playing style, players he admired, what he thought the team's strengths and weaknesses were. And Ilya, unlike when he was asked these things by reporters, happily answered and sparred back and forth with Yuna about the superiority of Canadian vs. Russian hockey. Shane's parents pointedly avoided any questions about Ilya's family, at Shane's instruction. He didn't tell them why, but they were happy to do what would make Ilya comfortable, and Shane was brimming with love for his parents and gratitude for Ilya engaging in such lively conversation.

Once everyone had eaten their share of dinner — Ilya having thirds of everything — David declared it was time to open presents in front of the fire he had worked so hard to build.

The surrealness of the whole day carried into the living room, as Shane thought back to all his childhood Christmases, some with his grandparents there when he was much younger, others just the three of them, always with lots of new hockey gear and happy smiles and hugs. And here was Ilya, just here, still talking to his mom about how often he gets his skates sharpened, as if it were all just an everyday occurrence.

Ilya stopped before sitting and said, "Oh Shane, my bag, left it in your room, be right back."

Shane watched him walk down the hall, then turned to his parents and his mom was smiling at him fondly. "He's such a nice boy, Shane, not at all like the media makes him out to be!"

His dad laughed, "I half expected him to show up with a supermodel on his arm and drinking from a bottle of vodka!"

Shane blushed, and said, "I mean… he does that sometimes too. But I'm glad you guys like him. He's becoming a good friend."

Yuna nodded, "I can see that, honey."

Before they could say more, Ilya walked back in, and Shane started distributing gifts from under the tree.

His parents gave both him and Ilya identical bags that had large soft blankets in them, Shane's with a number 24 and Ilya's with a number

81. Ilya looked so surprised to be getting a gift from Yuna and David, and thanked them so profusely, that Shane's heart swelled with pride. He mentally congratulated himself for inviting Ilya, despite the bedroom *moment*.

Shane gave his parents the custom Centaurs black and red leather jackets he had gotten them, with "Hollander" and Shane's number 24 on the back, to wear to home games.

"Oh Shane, these are perfect! Thank you!"

"Nice job, Shane, I'm going to wear this to the grocery store so I can remind everyone who my son is."

Shane laughed and rolled his eyes, then handed Ilya the box he'd gotten for him.

"Here, I hope you like it," Shane muttered hesitantly. He really had no clue what to get someone who loved sports cars and fancy vodka and cool clothes, and had at least a couple million dollars in the bank. So Shane found something a little corny that he thought would at least make Ilya laugh.

Ilya smirked as he unwrapped and opened the box, revealing a wooden Russian nesting doll painted to look like a beared hockey player wearing an Ottawa Centaurs jersey. Ilya's eyes sparkled, and he pressed his lips together, looking like he was suppressing a smile.

Chuckling, he asked, "Where you find this? So Russian but so Ottawa!"

Shane ducked his head, and said, "I saw it in a toy store window, I dunno, I really didn't know what to get you. It's stupid isn't it?"

Shane was relieved that his parents were occupied with opening their gifts to each other and weren't witnessing him squirm.

"No, I love! Is me, look!" He opened the doll to the next one inside, which had curly golden hair sticking out of its helmet.

Shane grinned so wide his face hurt, "Yeah, I thought that one looked like you, too."

Ilya continued opening the dolls, and when he got a few layers down to a smaller one with dark eyes, he said, "And this is you, very short."

Shane laughed and shoved him, saying, “Okay okay, time to put that away now.”

Ilya laughed too, and set it back in the box. Then he reached into the shopping bag and pulled out two envelopes. He stood to hand one to David and Yuna, and then the other to Shane.

“Oh, you really didn’t need to get us anything, and you already gave us the wine,” Shane’s mom insisted. But she opened the envelope anyway, and found inside a gift certificate to a fancy restaurant on the river in downtown Ottawa. “Wow, The Riviera, thank you, Ilya! We have been wanting to go there! This is so generous of you, dear.”

David chimed in, “Better get my sport coat dry cleaned for that one! Thank you, this is very nice.”

Ilya nodded at them, and Shane could tell he was relieved that the gift was a hit. He looked to Shane and said, “Your turn.”

Yuna interrupted, “I’m going to grab some cake for us all, we can have it in here! David, will you help me get the coffee?”

They went to the kitchen, leaving Shane to open the envelope from Ilya. When he did, he barked out a surprised laugh, “A McDonald’s gift card??”

Shane kept laughing, remembering that day in San Jose, shaking his head at Ilya. Ilya laughed along and said, “So you do not eat gross team meal on next road trip.”

“As long as you come with me.”

“Of course, you buy for me this time.”

“Was this just a ploy to get more McDonald’s?” Shane teased.

Ilya shrugged and smirked, “Maybe.”

Shane’s parents returned, and they enjoyed their dessert by the crackling fire, talking about the Centaurs’ game the next day against Philadelphia. It felt so comfortable, like Ilya had been part of the family for years.

Shane knew that his mom and Ilya would hit it off, and even Shane’s dad, who was a little more reserved, seemed to enjoy talking to him. It was everything Shane had hoped for when he worked up the courage

to invite him. Well, no. Not everything. If it was everything Shane hoped for, Ilya might be sitting next to him on the couch, not in an armchair on the other side of the room. Shane would be close to him, resting his head on Ilya's shoulder like that night they fell asleep on his hotel bed. But this was good — so good — and Shane would take it and enjoy it while he could.

They left fairly early that evening, needing to get a good night's sleep before their game, and Shane felt warmth bloom in his gut while he watched Ilya lean down to hug his mother and give his dad a warm handshake. Ilya thanked them for welcoming him for his first Canadian Christmas, and Shane hugged them both, saying he'd see them after the Philly game.

"We'll be wearing our jackets!" His mom grinned. "Drive safely, Shane, okay? See you tomorrow."

Shane was starting to fade with fatigue after the long day. He'd spent the morning so worked up with anxiety, then ate a lot of delicious food and even had a little wine. It was only 7pm, but he thought he'd probably pass out as soon as he hit the bed, and he hoped Hayden wouldn't be home yet.

When they got to Ilya's building, he pointed to the right and said, "Go to back door, is closer to my apartment."

"Oh sure." Shane turned the corner to get to the other side of the building. "Do you like your apartment here?"

"Yes, is nice. Good for me alone, you know?"

Shane understood the implication that Ilya probably liked having his privacy so he could bring women back to his apartment without any roommate interruptions. Not that it bothered Hayden that much.

"Right, yeah, makes sense."

"You want to see?" Ilya asked as Shane pulled into the back parking lot.

"Really?" Shane was shocked by the invitation, he got the sense that Ilya was very private. And if he let his mind go there, it felt a little like an invitation you'd might make at the end of a date — but he wasn't letting his mind go there.

"Why not? You see if you like the building, move out from Hayden

maybe."

Shane laughed, "Hayden's not so bad, Ilya," as he steered his car into a visitor parking spot.

"No. Just wants all your attention."

This was a surprise to Shane. Shane did think Hayden might be a little clingy, but he didn't realize Ilya noticed. Or cared. Why did Ilya care?

"Maybe…" Shane shrugged. "But we're friends, it's okay."

Ilya just hummed and got out of the car, Shane following close behind. They took the elevator to the 20th floor and Shane's entire body was buzzing with anticipation. But what was he anticipating? Seeing Ilya's apartment? It probably wasn't that different from his. But this was his personal space, so maybe it was just the anticipation of another layer of Ilya removed, of another small intimacy that he was offering.

Following Ilya through his door, Shane looked around, and yes, it was very similar to Shane's apartment. White walls and modern fixtures, a large, clean kitchen and a living room with a comfortable-looking sectional and a huge TV with multiple video game systems.

"It's nice," Shane offered. "Do you have a lot of guests?"

Shit, why did he ask that? He knew the answer, and he didn't like it.

"Some." Ilya walked toward the kitchen, so Shane didn't see his facial expression, but he guessed it was probably smug. Fuck, Shane felt stupid.

"Well, I should probably get going…" Shane started, wanting to end the torture now before he got too comfortable here.

Ilya turned back to him and asked, "Really? You just get here."

"Yeah, I'm really tired, you know? And I want to get a good night's sleep so I'm feeling ready for Philly tomorrow."

Ilya looked inexplicably disappointed, but Shane thought he must be reading his face wrong.

"Yes, okay." Ilya said. "Maybe you come back and we play video games here, no Hayden."

Shane huffed a laugh, “Yeah, definitely.” He hesitated before saying, “I’m really glad you came over for Christmas and got to meet my parents. I had such a great day, I hope you did too.”

“Great day, yes.” Ilya nodded, lips tipping up. “Your parents are very nice, very like you. I like Canadian Christmas. Thank you, Shane.” He said sincerely.

“Good,” Shane grinned, butterflies flitting around his heart. “You’ll have to come next year too.”

Ilya smiled fully now, “Okay.”

Somehow, they were standing much closer together than they had been a few moments ago. Shane could feel the heat radiating off of Ilya’s body, and he turned his head up to make eye contact. They stood there, smiling softly at each other, Shane not actually wanting to leave, and feeling like Ilya didn’t want him to go.

Shane’s eyes followed the movement of Ilya licking his full bottom lip, keeping his gaze there for a second too long. As if he were possessed, Shane felt his body move before he could even process what he was actually doing. He put a hand on Ilya’s shoulder and pressed himself up on his toes, and lightly placed his lips on Ilya’s in a tentative but lingering kiss.

He froze in place, in disbelief that he had just done this, and with the stark realization that Ilya was unmoving as well. Shane’s heart was beating out of his chest, and a furious blush was spreading rapidly across his face and ears. He finally snapped back into action and started to remove his lips from Ilya’s, but to his complete surprise, Ilya gripped Shane’s waist and pulled him back up.

Shane squeaked as Ilya pressed his mouth back onto Shane’s, opening his lips and deepening the kiss, and Shane melted into him. He slid his hand up to the back of Ilya’s neck, fingers dancing along Ilya’s hairline there, pulling him further down. At the same time, Ilya wrapped his arm completely around Shane’s waist, tugging him in tighter so their chests were pressed together, and swept his tongue across Shane’s lips.

With an embarrassing little moan, Shane opened to him. But he didn’t care about the noise. He didn’t care about *anything* except the smooth swipe of Ilya’s tongue across his, the firm grip of Ilya’s arm around him and other hand on the back of his head, the soft skin on the back of Ilya’s neck under his hand, and the fizzling warmth radiating off of their pressed-together bodies.

He pulled back to take a breath, and saw Ilya slowly letting go and opening his eyes. Shane dropped back to his heels, smiling wide, giddiness overtaking him, but it was quickly replaced by uncertainty when he saw the panicked look in Ilya's eyes.

Ilya released Shane and took a step back, blinking rapidly. Shane started to panic.

What had he just done? He did the ONE thing he had been telling himself not to do for months. He allowed himself to get close, spend time, even have brief physical contact, but he was *not allowed to kiss Ilya.*

But that's what he just did, and Ilya was clearly not happy about it. Even though Ilya had kissed him back. Kissed him back and then some. But the look on his face was one of complete regret, and Shane's heart, which was flying just a moment ago, had dropped all the way into his gut. Shane thought he might throw up. He had to leave.

"I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I should not have done that," Shane sputtered. He turned around, heading for the door, head down. "I'll leave, I'm sorry."

"Shane, wait," Ilya seemed to snap back to reality when Shane had reached for the door knob.

"No, I need to go, I'm so sorry Ilya, sorry I ruined your Christmas." Shane sighed, tears welling in his eyes, and opened the door. "I'll see you tomorrow, please don't hate me."

He pulled the door behind him, and ran down the stairs, his heavy footballs and breathing echoing down the empty stairwell. He exhausted himself halfway down the 20 floors, and went back into the hall to take the elevator the rest of the way. Shane leaned against the wall of the elevator, bent forward, head in his hands, breathing heavily, tears starting to stream down his cheeks.

How could he have been so reckless and so stupid? Not only had he humiliated himself, he'd also put his career in jeopardy. If Ilya was upset that Shane kissed him, he would be well within his rights to complain to the team management, and who knows what they would do. Trade Shane? Send him down to the AHL or even lower? God, he couldn't even imagine that.

And even if it wasn't the worst-case scenario, he had definitely ruined his friendship with Ilya — a friendship that he had started to cherish

— and their working relationship as teammates would be awkward at best, probably for the rest of the season, if not the rest of their careers.

The frigid winter air stung when it hit Shane's tear-damp cheeks, but it helped ground him in the present enough to get into his car. He didn't want to go home, in case Hayden was already there, and he couldn't go back to his parents without explaining what happened. What else could he do? Sighing, he took out his phone.

Shane: Hey, Merry Christmas! I hope I'm not interrupting time with your family.

Delzy: Do I need to call a doctor or a lawyer?

Shane: Huh?? No, why?

Delzy: Figured you needed help, needed to know if it was medical or legal.

Shane scoffed.

Delzy: Now I know it's not that… Merry Christmas. I'm back home, what's up?

Shane: I kissed Ilya.

Shane stared at the screen of his phone, waiting extremely impatiently for his captain's response. It took 2 full minutes for Delzy to reply.

Delzy: Come to my place.

He gave Shane his address, a house in a much fancier suburb than the one where his parents lived, and Shane drove there immediately. Delzy was standing in his open front door when Shane pulled through the gate and up his driveway.

Shane hung his head dejectedly as he walked through the door and Delzy patted him on the shoulder.

"Want a beer?" Delzy asked.

"Can I have two?" Shane whined.

Delzy laughed, but said, "Sure, kid. I'll meet you on the couch."

Shane walked into Delzy's huge living room and sank into the corner of his oversized couch. Delzy came in, holding two bottles of beer and

handed one to Shane.

“Let’s see how you do with one.” He smiled wryly at Shane.

They both took sips quietly. When Shane had texted Delzy, he was frenzied and desperate to talk to someone, anyone, about what had happened in Ilya’s apartment. But now, he was reluctant to say anything, embarrassment taking hold now that the panic had subsided.

“Look, you’re gonna have to talk at some point.” Delzy pointed his beer bottle at Shane. “Might as well be now. What the fuck happened?”

Shane sighed heavily, letting out a long breath, before retelling the events of the day. He told Delzy about inviting Ilya over for Christmas, the gifts they exchanged, the heated moment in Shane’s childhood bedroom, and how Ilya had invited Shane up to his apartment.

“And I don’t know, he invited me in, and it felt so much like a date, and the day had been so perfect, and we were just standing there looking at each other, and he licked his fucking *lips* , and something took over my body and I just leaned up and put my mouth on his like an absolute moron.”

“And he didn’t hit you?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Well, that’s a great sign. Could have been a lot worse.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. But, like, it was still *really bad.* ”

Delzy sighed. “So how did he react?”

Shane gazed past Delzy, thinking back to that magical moment when Ilya pulled Shane closer to him and swept his tongue into Shane’s mouth.

“He… well… he kissed me back.” Shane said, confused and disbelieving his own words.

Delzy put his beer down on the coffee table, and sighed again. There was going to be a lot of sighing in this conversation, Shane realized.

“What. The. Fuck?” Delzy emphasized each word. “Is this a celebratory visit? I thought you were going to say he wanted a

goddamn trade or something. I'm going to need a lot more information, Hollander. "

"That's the thing!" Shane leaned forward, gesturing with the beer in his hand. "I don't know what the fuck! He kissed me back, and fuck, Delzy, it was the best fucking kiss of my life."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, he kissed me back, and we kept kissing for a minute, and when I pulled back to breathe or whatever, it was like he had been hypnotized and suddenly snapped out of it. The look in his eyes, he was so freaked out, I could tell he regretted it immediately."

"But he didn't hit you?"

"Fuck, no, why do you keep asking that?"

Delzy was quiet for a beat too long, and Shane realized exactly why Delzy kept asking that.

"Oh shit, Delzy, I'm sorry—" Shane started, but Delzy cut him off.

"Don't worry about that, it was a long time ago." Delzy shook his head. "So what did he say?"

"Well, I immediately apologized, I apologized like a million times, and just kind of ran for the door. I think he called after me, but he didn't follow me, and I just bolted out of there. He didn't seem *angry* per se. Just really really shocked maybe, and definitely regretful."

Shane's lower lip quivered and he was at risk of crying again, so he bit down on his lip and looked down at his hand in his lap, rubbing his fingertips together to soothe the intensity of his feelings. Delzy got up from the chair he was sitting in and sat down right next to Shane, putting his big arm behind him and squeezing, just like he did in that New York club when Shane thought he might cry seeing Ilya leave with a girl. Delzy was even bigger than Ilya, and his tight grip was comforting and helped Shane breath through the overwhelm.

"Was that your first…" Delzy hesitated. "Was that your first time kissing a man?"

Shane nodded. The realization that his first kiss with a man was the most mind-blowing kiss of his life, the only kiss he'd truly and completely enjoyed, was more than Shane could handle.

Delzy sighed again, and said, “That’s a big moment.”

“But what the fuck was that, Delzy? Why did I ruin fucking *everything* ?” Shane couldn’t take in the enormity of the moment quite yet.

“You didn’t ruin everything, kid.” He let go of Shane and turned to face him.

“But what do I do now?”

“I think, if he didn’t react badly in the moment and he tried to call you back when you were leaving, it’s probably going to be fine.”

“Seriously?” Shane couldn’t see a reality in which this would just be *fine.*

“I mean, it’ll probably be awkward for a bit, but I think the best thing to do is just move on. If he doesn’t say anything to you about it, don’t say anything to him about it.”

“Okay, yeah, I guess that makes sense. But how do I stop thinking about it?” Shane knew he was saying too much, but he had to say this to someone or he would burst. “It was such a good kiss, I’m going to be thinking about it for the rest of my life. How am I going to look at him and not immediately kiss him again?”

Delzy laughed pityingly, “Damn, Hollander, you’ve got it bad.”

“Shut up, don’t you think I know that?”

“I promise you that you will have more great kisses in your life… But maybe you should cool it on the friendship stuff for now, no more hang outs outside of hockey.”

“What the fuck am I going to do on the road trip next week? I can’t ask for a roommate switch *again* .”

Delzy sighed yet again. “Yeah probably not... You don’t want to get on Bill’s bad side and end up with a room next to the elevator in every hotel for the next year… I think you just have to suck it up and try to keep your distance as much as you can until this mellows out.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to mellow out about that kiss.” Shane moaned, dropping his head in his hands and gripping his hair like he wanted to rip it out of his skull.

“Okay, well, I can definitely do something about that. How about we

go out, just the two of us, to a club soon?" Delzy offered.

Shane was extremely skeptical, the last time he'd been in a club with Delzy he got almost too drunk to walk and ended the night in tears. He hated clubs.

As if he could read Shane's mind, Delzy said, "It won't be like that club in New York. It'll be more our speed."

"Huh?"

"Fuck, Hollander, I'm gonna take you to a gay club, don't you understand subtlety?"

Shane laughed lamely, "Sorry, I'm not thinking that clearly right now."

"We'll find some guy for you to make out with or whatever, and you'll forget all about Roz, realize there's plenty of guys out there for great kisses."

Shane really didn't know what to think about that. Part of him was mortified to even be having this conversation, another part was deeply grateful to have Delzy as his captain, to have someone he trusted and who could understand what he was going through. But the biggest part of him was scared shitless at the idea of kissing another man, and scared that nothing would ever compare to Ilya.

"I guess so… I mean, I guess I should try, right?"

"That's the spirit. There are other fish in the sea and all that." Delzy clapped him on the shoulder. "Are you okay now? Or okay enough?"

"Yeah, I think so. Thank you. I'm sorry I crashed your Christmas evening."

"No worries, bud. I'm here for ya. But now you gotta get the fuck out of my house." Delzy stood, and Shane followed, laughing.

When Shane was home in bed, he thought more about the idea of making out with a random guy in a club. He really had only ever been attracted to Ilya when it came to men, right? He thought back through his teen years — maybe he had just been suppressing his attraction so much, he didn't really notice it. But it might have been there. He thought about watching Scott Hunter get drafted a few years before him, and how captivated he was by him. Was it admiration for a great

hockey player, or was it attraction to an objectively very handsome man? Maybe it was both. Shane had definitely never had that level of interest and captivation in a woman celebrity, that much was true.

His high school girlfriend was awesome, they had been friends for years, and Shane genuinely liked her. But he only really asked her to be his girlfriend because someone else told him she wanted him to. It felt like the correct thing to do, so did kissing her and so did losing their virginity together. Like, that's just what you did. And all his teammates were always bragging about how much sex they had — and they all thought Shane's girlfriend was hot — so it was just what Shane was supposed to do.

But the way he felt when he was kissing Ilya, that was a brand new feeling, and it was better than anything he could have even imagined. Ilya's lips were soft yet firm on his; it felt like he was gently taking control, and Shane had melted into the push and pull of Ilya's mouth, letting him lead. The grip of Ilya's arm around his waist, tugging him closer, had made Shane feel small and malleable, which was such a contrast to Shane's sense of himself as a sturdy athlete. He didn't realize how much he craved being held and almost cradled like that, like Ilya could take whatever he wanted from him, and he'd do it with care, and Shane would give it up willingly.

If that was what kissing felt like with Ilya, *more than kissing* was too much to even fathom. Is this why guys were so obsessed with sex? He kind of understood it now. Shane had just needed to find the right person. Except Ilya was the *wrong* person in every other way.

So maybe Shane could find someone at a club, a man who he knew was interested in other men. Not to fall in love, but just to try it out — kissing a guy who was actually available and into him. That might actually be nice, to feel wanted and desired.

But Shane kept coming back to the confounding thought that Ilya *did* make him feel wanted and desired. He was so confused. And desperate to know what Ilya was thinking and feeling right now. Was he lying in his bed, angry at Shane for crossing the line and messing up their friendship? Was he thinking about the kiss too, about how good it was? Or about how bad Shane was at kissing?

Shane wanted to grab his phone and text Ilya, ask him to talk, apologize again, *something* to clear the air. But he remembered Delzy's advice to just let it be, let Ilya set the tone. So he just sighed, turned off his light, and tried to sleep. But he lay in bed for hours, replaying

that earth-shattering kiss over and over, wishing he could go back in time and take it back, no matter how perfect it was.

Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play "I Can't Make You Love Me" by Bonnie Raitt.

Thank you all so much for supporting this fic! It's taken over my brain, and I'm so grateful to share it with you!!

ANOTHER HUGE GIANT MASSIVE thank you to Paupy and Nico for being just the absolute best and for helping me make sense of all my thoughts and anxieties about these dumdums. And to Nico especially for coming up with best possible Christmas gift for Ilya to give Shane - I now get emotional whenever I pass a McDonald's.

Chapter 6: Ilya Interlude #3

Chapter Summary

Probably about time for Ilya to call Galina for some therapy...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Christmas with the Hollanders was like something out of a movie. The fantasy of what Ilya always imagined Christmas would be like in America or Canada, come to life. He loved and regretted every second of that day. It was a glimpse into a different reality, one he could only peek into if invited, and that he'd always had to leave.

Their house was so warm and welcoming, like a truly happy family lived there. He'd scanned all the photos around the living room — from Shane's parents' wedding, Shane as a baby in his mother's arms, Shane and his dad at a Centaurs game when Shane was a kid. The furniture was nice, but lived-in, and they all settled into their seats so easily. Ilya could see how comfortable Shane was, easy in a way Ilya had only ever seen him on the ice, and maybe that one night in their hotel room when Shane fell asleep on him. Otherwise, Shane was usually a bit tense, always holding something back or on guard.

He compared the Hollander home to the one he grew up in. On a holiday with his family, there would have been the smell of delicious food coming from the kitchen, but no sense of joy or fun or happiness to accompany it. He remembered his mother, then his step mother, quietly serving their meal, and the chatter of his father and brother talking shit and criticising the food. Ilya's father would ask him about hockey and nitpick every play he made in his last game and berate him for his dream of joining the NHL. And his mother would offer him a soft smile, but not much else in the way of comfort or defending him. It was too dangerous for her to say anything contrary to his father anyway.

Yuna and David Hollander couldn't be more different. They were affectionate, they joked with each other, they effused with love and pride in their son, and even offered some of that pride to Ilya. They were Centaurs fans through and through, and talked about how well Ilya was playing and what an asset he was to the team and how happy the whole city was to have him representing them. Never in his life

had anyone spoken so kindly to him about his hockey-playing. Just the thought of it could make Ilya's eyes well up with tears.

And then — then there was Shane's bedroom. When he sat on Shane's bed, the look on Shane's face floored him. His smile was so sweet and surprised and shy. Ilya wanted to take a bite out of him, he was so adorable. So of course Ilya deflected and teased Shane about his poster with Delzy on it (which was objectively hilarious, but he didn't have to call Shane out on it).

The deflection didn't work though, because Shane's blush blooming over his freckled cheeks only made Ilya want to devour him even more. The image of Shane lying back on his bed under him nearly undid Ilya, and he didn't know what he might have done if Yuna hadn't called them out for dinner.

After dinner, it only got worse when they exchanged gifts. The nesting doll Shane gave him was so ridiculous, so cute, and so weirdly thoughtful. So much more thoughtful than his stupid McDonald's gift card. Although, he did get a good laugh out of Shane, and the promise of another McDonald's date. When Shane asked if it was just a ploy to get more McDonald's, Ilya so badly wanted to be honest and say, "No, it's to spend more time seeing you smile."

Of course, at the end of the day, Ilya was back on his bullshit of making terrible decisions and fucking himself over yet again. He had managed to contain himself, keep his feelings in check all day, but then he had to go and invite Shane up to his apartment like he was a girl he was trying to fuck. He felt this insane urge to show Shane his own space, having been in Shane's childhood home, like he wanted to balance the scales or something — show Shane a little bit more of his internal life. And that was really the moment when he ruined it all. He tried to take too much, and it ended in disaster.

Ilya had never expected Shane to kiss him, it was a true shock. But it was a shock in the way it's a shock to step into a hot shower and then immediately feel relief after a long day, or to run into an old friend you were just thinking of, or to win an award you didn't even know you were nominated for.

Ilya knew it was wrong, knew he *shouldn't*, but he couldn't stop himself from kissing back. Shane felt like putty in his hands, the way he gave himself over to Ilya within an instant of feeling their tongues together. He wanted to wrap Shane up in his arms and carry him to his bed, then lay him out and taste every inch of him until he was

begging to come. He wanted to hear Shane beg and then give him everything he needed. The sound of Shane squeaking when Ilya had pulled him closer, and then moaning when Ilya licked into his mouth, would be playing on repeat in Ilya's mind forever. His delicious noises would haunt Ilya, and he knew he'd be replaying them while he touched himself and imagined Shane's soft lips moving down his body or the taste of Shane in his mouth.

When Ilya broke the kiss, he didn't expect Shane to run away, and he hated the way it ended, but it was probably for the best. Ilya could tell that Shane was completely smitten with him for months now, it was obvious long before Shane kissed him. And Ilya was trying like hell to contain his own affection, keep everything at friendship level, while still spending time with Shane, joking around with Shane, and playing fucking incredible hockey with Shane. He knew he was fucking up by getting so close, and now he needed to put a stop to it.

But those parting words: *please don't hate me.*

As if Ilya could ever hate him. As if Ilya wasn't completely falling for him.

Shane just deserved so much better than Ilya. He deserved someone who also had a loving family to introduce Shane to, who could spend time with Shane's parents and all be one big happy family. He deserved someone who didn't have the emotional baggage of a dead mom and the complicated reality of being a queer Russian. He deserved better than Ilya's dirtbag lifestyle that he carefully cultivated to avoid the exact pain he was feeling right now.

And Ilya wasn't deserving of the pure, kind, goodness of Shane Hollander's love. He was a sleazy womanizer who just happened to be bisexual, he liked to live recklessly to chase away any bad feelings that might try to creep up on him. Shane made him want to be less reckless and more responsible, and that just wouldn't do. It could only lead to more hurt down the line, and Ilya knew how to prevent that. He'd known this whole time, and Shane kissing him was the perfect reminder that he needed to keep his distance.

So, when he saw Shane at the game tomorrow, he'd steer clear of him. He'd treat him like any other teammate. Respectful, cooperative. Nothing more. No over the top celebrations, no squeezing in next to Shane on the bench. He had to keep his head down and do his job. He knew Shane would be hurt, but he'd get over it. The hurt Shane felt now was worth it to avoid the pain Ilya would undoubtedly cause him

later.

Now Ilya just had to learn how to endure Shane hating him and doing nothing about it. While playing hockey with him. And sharing a room with him on road trips. And knowing what his mouth tasted like. Should be easy.

Chapter End Notes

Alexa, play "Night Shift" by Lucy Dacus.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I hope you're hungry..... for angst.

I've been listening to this song nonstop while writing this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day after Christmas, Shane woke up feeling groggy. He was irritable before he was conscious enough to remember why he felt like shit. Shane's panic had turned into mortification at Delzy's, and now had transformed into a rancid mood Shane knew would follow him around all day.

He grumbled his way to the bathroom, then to the kitchen to start his game-day routine. Breakfast was a protein smoothie, pre-made sweet potato hash and a mountain of eggs, and whole grain toast, plus lots of water from now until a few hours before the game. Then he'd head down to the gym in their building to ride the bike for a while and get himself loosened up. He wished he could go for a run, but he didn't want to run on the treadmill because it made him think of Ilya, and he really didn't need to be doing that. And it was snowing outside, of course, so that was a no go.

He had just sat down on a kitchen bar stool to start eating when Hayden walked into the room, clearly having just woken up. Hayden got home after Shane was already in bed last night, and while he wasn't asleep, he pretended he was to avoid the conversation that was about to happen anyway. Time to fake a smile and steer away from any mention of Ilya.

"'Morning." Shane nodded to Hayden without looking up from his food.

"Hey bud, how was your Christmas?" Hayden replied cheerfully while he started making coffee.

"Good." Shane shoveled more eggs in his mouth. Then he remembered he was faking being in a good mood and asked, "How was yours, how's your family?"

“Oh it was awesome, I missed my sisters and brother so much, and my niece is 10 months old now, and she’s so adorable…” And Hayden began telling the whole story of his Christmas with his family, and how his niece snuggled with his parents’ dog, and his parents did something or another, Shane really wasn’t paying attention. He nodded and said “cool” at the appropriate moments, said “aw so cute” at the picture of his niece, and it seemed like Hayden bought it.

“But what about you? How was Christmas with Rozanov, what did your parents think of him?” Hayden asked. “I bet he was a lot nicer to them than he is to me, right?” Hayden chuckled at his own joke.

Shane sighed and tried to smile. “It was great. My parents loved him, especially my mom, she’s such a hockey nerd. They just got going and didn’t stop. And yeah, it was nice.”

He turned away from Hayden, unable to fake the smile anymore. It *was* nice. It was perfect, the best Christmas ever. Until Shane ruined it.

“I’m going to head down to the gym,” Shane said, putting his dishes in the dishwasher. “Gotta keep to the schedule, you know?”

“Ha, of course man, I’ll see you down there in a bit.”

Shane grabbed his water bottle and headed down, and pushed himself – probably too hard – on the bike for a pre-game workout. He was going to tire his legs out, but he couldn’t stop, he was so desperate to drown out the memory of Ilya’s lips on his.

When Shane arrived at the arena for prep and warmups, Ilya was already in his stall taping his sticks. A lump rose up in Shane’s throat and his stomach clenched at the sight of him there, head down, focused on the precise application of tape exactly how he liked it. He was frozen in the doorway, not wanting to step in and attract Ilya’s attention, but unable to look away.

But their goalie Martins Egeland walked up and clapped Shane on the back with a loud, “Hollander! How was your Christmas!”

Ilya’s head snapped up and their eyes locked for a moment, before Shane turned away and greeted Eggy. “It was great, thanks, how about you?”

He watched Ilya out of the corner of his eye as he headed to his stall, listening to Eggy ramble. Ilya watched him too, chewing on his

bottom lip and unfairly drawing Shane's attention there. They made eye contact again, then immediately looked away from each other. Normally, Shane would have gone right over to Ilya to start talking strategy, and for Ilya to gently tease him about whatever he was anxious about that game, and it would ease his pre-game nerves.

But it seemed that Delzy was right, Ilya wasn't going to say anything. He was going to keep his distance, so Shane would do the same. The chatter of the room lulled Shane into a sense of normalcy as he started getting his stuff together, but he couldn't help but think that some of the guys were noticing that he and Ilya weren't glued to each other. Delzy had come in, and Shane definitely felt his eyes on him. Shane looked over to the captain, and he nodded his head towards the hallway, so Shane followed.

Once out of earshot of the dressing room, Delzy asked, "You good? Gonna be okay for the game?"

"Yeah, yes," Shane nodded emphatically. "I'll be good. I'm locked in."

"Okay… because you look kind of like a kicked puppy, and I'm definitely not the only one who noticed." Delzy cringed as he said it.

"Fuck. Fuck!" Shane kicked the wall with his skate. "This is so fucking embarassing."

"Listen, no one knows what's going on other than you, me, and Roz. He looks fine, even though it's weird you guys aren't having a chucklefest over in his stall."

"That is not helpful, but thank you so much for pointing it out."

"Sorry, sorry. But if you're fine, then I'm fine. Just fix your face, and let's go practice."

Shane nodded intently. "Right. Fix my face. Got it, cap." He turned to walk back, but Delzy grabbed his shoulder.

"You're gonna be okay, Shane." Delzy insisted. He didn't usually use Shane's first name, opting to call him Hollander, or just kid. But Shane was grateful to hear it, it felt like he was a true friend, like he actually cared about Shane, not just as a captain trying to make sure his teammate was in the right headspace.

Shane nodded again. "Yeah. I know. Thanks."

The game was kind of a disaster, as games the day after holidays often were. Both teams were slower and more sluggish on the ice than usual, and both were making stupid mistakes, which meant stupid penalties. Shane had been dreading the power plays tonight, but it was surprisingly easy to play with Ilya, despite their apparent silent-treatment standoff.

They were making the same smooth, mind-reading level passes as usual, gliding across the ice with unrivaled speed, and keeping the puck away from defenders like it was easy. One particularly beautiful pass made its way from Ilya to Shane's stick and he smacked it hard, right into the top right corner of the net, breaking the 2-2 stalemate that had lasted until the end of the 3rd period. He punched the air in celebration, sliding over to his teammates as they surrounded him.

Ilya joined the huddle and patted Shane on his helmet along with everyone else, and Shane shot him a surprised glance. Ilya shrugged and raised his brows with an exaggerated frown, and Shane understood — getting a goal transcended everything. Shane was so grateful that at least this, the game, the most important thing, hadn't been completely ruined. He almost laughed with the relief of it. Because regardless of anything else, Shane's priority was great hockey, winning games, and getting as far as they could this season. If he lost that, he lost everything.

They won the game 3-2, and Shane once again found himself jostled affectionately by his teammates on the walk down the tunnel to the dressing room. As soon as they got there, Jessica, the team PR person, indicated to Shane that the scrum of reporters was waiting for him, so he went to his stall and waved her over.

"Where's Rozanov? They want to talk to you together."

"Oh, uh… I don't know." Shane said, looking around and trying not to blush.

"I'm surprised, usually you two are attached at the hip," she teased.

"Uh yeah, guess so…" Shane trailed off, unsure what to say. They both looked around the room and asked a couple of the guys if they'd seen Ilya, but no one knew where he was.

Jessica sighed. "Well, I can't keep them waiting forever. They'll have to be satisfied just talking to you."

She waved over the small group of reporters, who all stuck their

recorders and cameras in Shane's face.

"Great goal Shane. Seems like a Hollander goal on an assist from Rozanov on the powerplay is becoming a Centaurs' signature move. How'd it feel scoring with your friend tonight?"

"Yeah, uh, it felt good. We make a good team, and we're just, uh, putting all our energy out there to score every time, and yeah, it always feels good when the puck makes it into the net."

"Where's Rozanov now? We'd love to get his perspective on the goal."

Shane shrugged, attempting a smile but probably ending up with more of a grimace. He couldn't very well say, "He's avoiding me like the plague because I kissed him yesterday and ruined our friendship." Instead he replied, "I dunno, I'm sure he's around here somewhere."

"Are you guys looking forward to the All-Star game in February?"

"It would be an honor to be invited to the All-Star game, but the selections haven't been made yet, so I'll let you know how I feel if that happens."

They all laughed, because it was pretty universally expected that both Shane and Ilya would be All-Stars. If Shane was honest, he'd say that he completely forgot about the All-Star game — but now that they mentioned it, the idea of going filled him with dread. He knew he would be pushed into all sorts of activities and media obligations with Ilya if they were both there, and at this moment, he'd rather play a game with no pads or helmet than endure that kind of attention.

The reporters asked a few more questions about the game, Philly's defense, and their upcoming midwest road trip, then finally left Shane alone. The entire time, Ilya remained absent from the dressing room, and Shane wondered how he had managed to hide. Tired and ready to get away from everyone, Shane decided he'd just shower at home, so he told Hayden he'd see him at the apartment and snuck out without speaking to anyone else.

When Hayden got home, Shane was already showered and eating a snack on the couch. Hayden dropped his bag and immediately joined Shane, grabbing his smoothie out of his hands to take a sip.

"Hey!" Shane protested, grabbing his smoothie back. "Fuck off, there's leftovers in the fridge if you want some, jeez."

“Yours is better.” Hayden shrugged.

Shane rolled his eyes but smiled, glad at least one of his friendships was intact.

“So what the fuck is going on?” Hayden asked, turning his whole body on the couch to look at Shane.

“What do you mean? I’m having a smoothie?”

“Don’t be stupid. What the fuck is going on with you and Roz?”

Shane’s heart was suddenly pounding in his chest. Did Delzy say something? Did *Ilya?* “What? Why are you asking me that?”

“Um, because you guys totally avoided each other tonight? Normally you’re up each other’s asses and giggling about some shit or another.”

“Oh…”

“So like, he goes to your house for Christmas and then you guys aren’t friends anymore? What the fuck happened?”

Shane sighed. How much could he trust Hayden? He *wanted* to trust him, he really did. But he kind of had no filter and talked *a lot* .

“Nothing happened, don’t worry about it.”

“Seriously? You can’t really expect me to believe that.” Hayden raised an eyebrow at him with an incredulous look on his face.

“Seriously. We just, you know, spent a lot of time together. Got talked out or whatever, I don’t know. It’s really nothing.”

“So you’re just not going to tell me?”

“Hayden, there’s nothing to tell!”

Hayden sighed and crossed his arms. “Fine, don’t tell me. Whatever.”

“Hayd…” Shane tried, but Hayden stood up.

“I’m going to have my smoothie in my room. See you tomorrow.” He grabbed the leftover smoothie out of the refrigerator and walked away.

“Don’t leave the dirty cup in your room overnight!” Shane yelled after

him.

“Oh my god, you’re impossible!” Hayden yelled back, but he was laughing.

The Centaurs flew to St. Louis on the 27th, and that morning found Shane bracing himself for the awkward rooming situation.

“Bet you wish you hadn’t requested a roommate change now, huh buddy?” Hayden asked him as they drove to the airport together.

“First of all, I didn’t request a roommate change, and you have to stop saying I did,” Shane insisted.

“Whatever you say…” Hayden replied.

“Seriously dude?” Shane huffed. “Whatever. Anyway. Nothing is going on with me and Ilya, so if we are still rooming together, that’s not a problem.”

“Right. So you’re still not going to tell me. Cool.” Hayden didn’t sound too annoyed, but Shane could tell that he was frustrated.

Shane wished he could tell Hayden everything, he really did. But as much as he felt that brotherly bond, he had only known Hayden since the summer, and Shane didn’t want to just assume that Hayden would be cool with Shane being… not straight. He probably would be, he wasn’t the type of guy to use slurs or anything like that. But not using slurs and being okay living with a guy who wanted to kiss other guys weren’t the same thing.

So Shane kept it to himself. Delzy was the only person he could trust, because Delzy had a secret of his own. They had an understanding that he’d never have with Hayden.

On the plane to St. Louis, Shane sat next to Hayden, and Ilya walked down the aisle past him without so much as a glance. A lump formed in Shane’s throat with the disappointment he felt at being totally ignored by Ilya, but he had to remind himself it was for the best. He took a deep breath and focused on Hayden, who was asking which movie Shane wanted to watch.

“I’m down for whatever,” Shane said, trying for chipper, but coming off as overly enthusiastic.

“Cool, Jurassic Park it is,” Hayden responded and started it up on his

laptop.

Shane didn't really pay attention to the movie. He stared at the screen and urged himself not to turn around to see where Ilya was sitting, who he was talking to, what he was doing. Not knowing felt wrong. The self-loathing Shane had been fighting was rising like a tide, threatening to drown him. He was still in disbelief at how epically he had fucked up, and he wondered how long it would take for this feeling to fade.

At the hotel, Shane and Ilya were given their key cards to the room they were sharing. It was too much to hope that Ilya would risk asking for a change again. So they exchanged brief nods, at least acknowledging that this was happening, and Ilya stalked off toward the elevators.

Shane, on the other hand, lingered in the lobby, pretending to be really invested in someone's fascination with the Gateway Arch. When he finally made it up to the room, Ilya's stuff was all there, but Ilya was not. Shane was sort of relieved, but the mean voice in the back of his head was quick to remind him that Ilya was probably out at a bar finding some girl to hook up with. Ilya was probably kissing her right now, all memories of his mouth on Shane's gone, replaced by some beautiful, soft, sexy woman who could give Ilya exactly what he wanted.

The one upside was that Shane could scarf down his team-provided dinner and get into bed before Ilya was back from his tryst, so they wouldn't have to face each other until the morning. And even then, he knew Ilya liked to sleep in a little later, so Shane could get up extra early and head down to breakfast before Ilya even woke up. He would make this work. He had no choice.

His plan for getting up early worked well — Ilya was still buried in his blankets when Shane left for breakfast, and then he was in the bathroom with the door closed when Shane returned. He quickly got his shit together and went to meet Hayden downstairs in the lobby to wait for the bus to the arena. They'd fly to Columbus immediately after the game in St. Louis, so Shane had the whole day before he had to face being alone with Ilya again.

The first night in Columbus followed the same routine: Ilya was nowhere to be found when Shane got to their room, and he pushed away all jealous thoughts of Ilya with his hands all over some random Ohio State sorority girls and tried to sleep.

The games in St. Louis and Columbus went about the same too: they didn't have any overly friendly interactions, but they were still teammates working together on the ice, and they won both games.

They would stay over another night in Columbus after that game — the next day they'd fly to Minneapolis. And for a third night in a row, Ilya was gone by the time Shane got up to their room. Shane woke with the sunrise and went for a walk in the sharp cold winter air, just to feel something other than regret.

When he returned to the hotel, he saw Ilya walking to the coffee shop in the lobby and they locked eyes for a second — Ilya's expression was blank, like he had totally closed whatever door he had opened to Shane that afternoon playing video games on his couch. The sparkling light Shane had previously seen in Ilya's eyes was gone.

At the team breakfast, Shane sat down next to Delzy, who was alone eating a giant pile of bacon and eggs.

"Hey," Delzy mumbled through a mouthful. "How's 'operation pretend we didn't kiss going?'"

"What the fuck — be quiet!" Shane hissed at him.

"You're going to talk to your captain like that on game day?"

"Shit, sorry," Shane grimaced.

"I'm joking, damn." Delzy took a sip of his coffee. "I guess it's not going well, then?"

"I mean, I'm successfully avoiding him as much as I can," Shane whispered. "And he's gone off and hooked up every night so far, so I guess that's a clear enough message."

"Sorry, bud," Delzy said with a pat on his shoulder. "When we get back home, we're going to find you your own hookup, ok?"

Shane sighed, "Yeah, sure."

He really wasn't eager to do that, but he trusted Delzy and needed to cut off this obsession with Ilya off before it started affecting his game.

When the team landed in Minneapolis later that day, they headed straight to practice before going to the hotel. Shane mentally prepared for the same avoidance routine, which was starting to feel less like

torture and more like sad resignation.

Once again when Shane got up to his room after a long practice, Ilya's bags were there, but he was nowhere to be found. Shane sighed and sank into the armchair next to the window, staring out at the river that reminded him so much of the river back home in Ottawa. He wondered if he'd ever feel excited about his team and his career again. Would this heartache last forever? Delzy seemed to think it wouldn't, but Shane didn't know how he'd ever move past it.

On top of everything, the next day was New Year's Eve, and Shane couldn't imagine a more miserable night to be heartbroken. He guessed that win or lose, his teammates would want to go out after the game, but all Shane wanted to do was wallow in his hotel room. He couldn't stomach the idea of witnessing Ilya getting with yet another girl and kissing her at midnight, not now that he knew the press of his lips and tongue and what his mouth tasted like.

They lost to Minnesota. On the 5th day of a road trip right after Christmas, it wasn't the most unexpected loss, but it still stung. Shane in particular had played like shit, at least by his own standards, which were higher than most. He missed several passes and shot wide on a couple of goal attempts that should have been easy. He was just struggling. Their coach kindly didn't single Shane out in his post-game lecture, probably because this was a very rare occurrence from Shane. But he did catch Shane's eye when he mentioned the importance of *accuracy* and *efficiency* , and Shane might have been paranoid, but he felt some lingering looks from some teammates too.

Ilya played brilliantly, as usual, with a goal and an assist, and Shane had the most intense urge to apologize to him for costing them the win. He had been wallowing so much in romantic feelings for Ilya — replaying their kiss over and over in his head — but right now, he missed Ilya's friendship more than anything.

If Shane hadn't fucked up so epically, Ilya would be walking over to sit in the stall next to him and looking at Shane expectantly, and Shane would launch into a rant about all the mistakes he made. He would go into detail about each play and how it could have been better, and Ilya would just nod and listen, and when Shane finally paused to catch his breath, Ilya would say, "Okay, will work on that at practice." And Shane would take a deep breath and feel better.

They'd gone through it after almost every loss. Every time, Ilya listened intently and said he'd work on it with Shane. He wouldn't

placate, he wouldn't try to make Shane feel better about the game — no, Ilya wanted them to be better too. He wasn't angry, but he was determined to be the best, and having someone understand Shane like that was better than any uplifting speech.

But now Shane was alone with his thoughts, cataloging every mistake silently to himself, and missing his friend. He'd talk to Hayden, but it just wasn't the same. All Hayden would say is "you're doing great!" and that's not what Shane needed.

Ilya walked out of the showers with Ricci, chatting and being his usual charming self. It sounded like Ilya was teasing Ricci about losing money to him during their poker game on the plane yesterday, and Shane prickled with jealousy. It was like he didn't even care that he and Shane had just stopped talking. He didn't miss their post-game analysis or hotel movie nights or anything.

For the first time since Christmas, anger replaced Shane's sadness. He was furious at Ilya for ignoring him, and he knew that made him a hypocrite, but he didn't care. Shane wanted Ilya to miss him just as much as he missed Ilya, but it seemed like he couldn't care less. Well, fuck that. It was time for Shane to stop missing him too.

Back at their hotel, a bunch of guys gathered around in the lobby to pick a bar to go to. To Hayden's surprise, Shane joined them.

"You're going out?" He asked incredulously.

"Yeah, am I not allowed?" Shane replied with defiance.

"No no, you're allowed, I'm just surprised! This will be awesome!" Hayden stuck his hand up and high fived Shane. "I'm gonna be your wingman tonight, buddy!"

Shane smiled. He was grateful to have Hayden, and he wanted to try to have a good time and start the new year on a positive note.

That positive attitude vanished a couple hours later when Shane was 3 beers deep at the bar, and Hayden was cozying up with a girl in a booth, nodding vigorously about whatever she was talking about. Shane was alone again.

Shane took another beer from the bartender and looked around for someone else to talk to. He pulled up to a rowdy conversation between Lapierre and a few others about who would win in a fight, the four of them or a grizzly bear. Not at all interested in that topic,

Shane shouted over them, “who wants to do shots?!”

“Damn Hollander,” Clarkson, a D-man on the 3rd line, smacked him on the back a little too hard. “Let’s fuckin go!”

They ordered a round of tequila shots and Shane swallowed his with a grimace. He sucked the lime and scanned the room, then spotted Ilya on the small dance floor, dancing with a beautiful girl, of course. She had her back to him and was rubbing her ass against his crotch, and his arm was draped around her waist holding her in place.

Shane’s stomach lurched — fuck, he was going to be sick. He hurried to find the bathroom, the other guys already back on the bear conversation and oblivious to Shane. He made the mistake of looking at himself in the bathroom mirror and his reflection looked back at him with disgust. And also there were two of him. And was he going to puke? Oh, yep, definitely puking. Vomiting in the garbage can in this bar bathroom was probably an all time low for Shane, and it felt like the perfect disgusting cap on the miserable week he’d had.

He washed his mouth out with the (hopefully not poisonous) mouthwash in the bathroom attendant station, which seemed abandoned, and returned to the festivities. It was almost midnight, and then Shane could reasonably leave and pass out before Ilya got back from fucking that girl.

The bar had somehow gotten louder and more crowded in the few minutes Shane was in the bathroom, and he had to push his way through the clusters of drunken partiers to find his way back to the bar and his teammates. But it looked like all of them had paired off with girls — except Delzy, who was laughing with the bartender.

The giant countdown on the big projector screen at the back of the dance floor showed 15 seconds until midnight. Shane stumbled toward it, not sure who or what he was looking for at this point. He felt so alone in this stupid crowd, and he just wanted to find a friendly face.

But just as the whole bar started chanting the 10-second countdown, the face Shane found was Ilya’s. He stood there, facing away from the countdown screen, looking directly at Shane. The girl he had been dancing with was gone. Shane stared back at Ilya, unblinking. Everyone around them was counting — *8! 7! 6!* — but the noise faded behind a tinny ringing in Shane’s ears.

Ilya looked so incredible, it took Shane’s breath away. His hair was a

mess from the girl's hand running through it earlier, and the way it caught the lights on the dance floor gave him a halo effect. He was wearing that same shearling trimmed leather jacket that he'd worn on Christmas and it made Shane's heart twinge with the memory of seeing Ilya's timid smile in the entryway of his home.

His full, lush lips were parted slightly, like he was about to speak. If he did, Shane wouldn't hear him; it was too loud and he was too far away. Every inch of Shane's body was humming with desire and drunken anger. Why didn't Ilya want him? What cruel force had put Ilya here in Shane's path, talented and funny and handsome and surprisingly kind, only to make him unavailable in every way? How did this one person have the power to throw Shane's life into disarray after a lifetime of working toward the NHL?

The countdown reached one, and they just held each other's gaze, silent and unmoving as the happy people around them cheered "Happy New Year!" and kissed and laughed and hugged.

The sudden burst of noise jostled Shane out of his trance and he turned and bolted out of the bar, shoving people out of his way without looking back. He just had to get outside. The packed room was so hot and overbearing and loud, Shane had to get out.

He stumbled out of the door into the starkly cold night. It was mostly quiet, except for some smokers huddling together for warmth and some cars and passersby — it was such a relief to be out of the stifling crowd. Shane heard a brief wave of noise and some footsteps crunching behind him. Was it Ilya? Did he come after him?

"Hey, kid."

No, it was Delzy. Always there when Shane was at his lowest, it seemed. "Need your jacket?"

He held it out and Shane pulled it on with a quiet, "Thanks."

"Want to walk back to the hotel with me?"

"Sure," Shane shrugged.

"We gotta stop this pattern, buddy," Delzy chuckled.

"Huh?" Shane was too drunk to understand Delzy's subtlety.

"Me walking your drunk ass back to a hotel." Delzy threw his arm

around Shane, like he always did. It was nice. Comforting. Shane didn't mind it at all actually.

"Sorry," Shane mumbled. "And thanks."

"What are you apologizing for?" Delzy asked, as they started walking the short way to their hotel.

Shane laughed without any joy, "For being a fucking mess. For playing like shit tonight. For being probably gay and making it your problem."

Delzy didn't respond, so Shane just hung his head and tried to walk in a straight line, leaning into him for support.

People started pouring out of bars into the streets around them as they walked, and Shane looked wistfully at all the happy people celebrating the fresh start of a new year. He thought back to how anxiously hopeful he felt that first day of training camp, the day he met Delzy and greeted Ilya in Russian. So much had changed since that day. These men, the entire Centaurs team, weren't strangers anymore. They were a part of his daily life, comrades in arms (well, sticks), and Shane needed to find that hope again if this year was going to be anything other than miserable.

In the elevator, Shane leaned his head sleepily against Delzy's shoulder. He was grateful for Delzy, more than he could express. And Delzy was always looking out for him and checking on him — like he really cared. Shane had never really had a friend like that. Shane looked up at the older man and thought absently that he was actually very handsome, in a rugged 30-something kind of way.

Did Delzy think Shane was good-looking? He pondered it as the elevator door dinged, and Delzy steered Shane to the left with a hand on his side.

Oh shit. *Did Delzy think Shane was good-looking?*

The alcohol in his bloodstream made Shane's thoughts feel mushy, and he was struggling to wade through them. Maybe Delzy had been flirting with Shane this whole time and he didn't even realize it because he was so obsessed with Ilya. Did Shane *want* Delzy to be flirting with him? He groaned internally.

"You gonna be okay?" Delzy stopped them both and turned Shane to face him, a concerned yet amused look on his face.

Oh, maybe he groaned externally.

“Yeah, fine,” Shane’s eyes half closed as he answered.

“Let’s get you to bed.” Delzy spurred him to start walking again.

To bed… was Delzy trying to take him to bed? No way, right? But Shane had no experience with men. Well, no experience that wasn’t him making a fool of himself.

Maybe Delzy was into him, and Delzy did say that Shane needed to kiss someone else so he could move on from Ilya. Maybe he meant himself? Was he hinting this whole time and Shane didn’t even realize it?

Shane considered it. He could definitely do a lot worse. And Delzy was so *nice* to him. Helpful and encouraging. Funny and sarcastic without being mean. Shane liked all those things. Yeah, maybe he *did* want Delzy to take him to bed. That would show Ilya — Shane can move on too.

They had arrived at Shane’s door, but Shane just stood there looking at his captain.

“Do you have your key?” He asked with a smirk. Oh. Room key. Yeah.

Shane took it out and swiped it a few times, but the door kept blinking red. Delzy grabbed the key out of Shane’s hand and got the door to finally open. Wow, okay, he was eager. He held the door open for Shane, and turned to leave. Shane was *so* confused.

“You’re going?” Shane asked.

“Uh… you need me to stay?” Delzy asked.

Shane tugged Delzy into the room by his sleeve, and Delzy laughed. “What the hell, kid?”

“Come in if you want to,” Shane urged.

The door slowly closed behind Delzy and he looked down at Shane, brows furrowed in amused confusion.

Fuck it, Shane was just going to go for it. He needed to just get this over with so he could start forgetting about kissing Ilya. He put his arms up around Delzy’s neck to pull him in, and the confusion on

Delzy's face turned to horror. Shane was just about to kiss him when Delzy grabbed Shane's hands from the back of his neck and yanked them off.

"Whoa, what the fuck, Hollander?" Delzy dropped Shane's hands and stepped back.

Oh shit. No. Had Shane read this wrong? *Again?* Oh my god, how did this keep *happening* to him?

Shane backed away towards one of the beds in the room, "Oh shit, oh fuck, I'm so sorry, I thought… I thought you were taking me to bed? I thought you wanted…"

Shane was panicking again and he couldn't believe he found himself in this situation with another teammate. He ran his hands through his hair and pulled a little to make sure he wasn't dying of shame.

"Whoa, Shane, it's okay. You're okay." Delzy stepped toward Shane with his arms out like Shane was a wild animal who might lash out. "I'm so sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I just meant, I was going to get you to *your bed* so you could sleep."

Shane fell backwards onto the bed, berating himself along the way. "How am I so fucking stupid? Again?! How could I be so stupid again? What is *wrong* with me? Oh god."

"You're just drunk." Delzy offered. "And young and new to this and maybe a little stupid, but everyone is stupid at your age, for real."

"So you were definitely not hitting on me?" Shane tilted his head up to ask.

"Sorry, Hollander, no." Delzy shot him his now-familiar pitying look. "You're at least 10 years too young for me."

"Right." Shane flopped his head back.

"Damn it." Delzy sat down in the desk chair facing Shane. "This is still about Roz, isn't it?"

Shane groaned.

"I'll take that as a yes. Look, bud, I think I might have given you some bad advice on Christmas."

"Whadduyou mean?" Shane slurred from behind the arm he'd thrown

over his face.

“Yeah, I was… fuck. I was thinking more about my own situation than yours, and I think this might be different.”

Shane sat up and turned to look at Delzy, so curious what “his own situation” even was.

“When I was a rookie, I had a Roz. A guy who I got really close to. We were inseparable that whole first season together. Everyone knew it was Delzy and Fitzy, we were a unit.”

“Fitzy? You mean Corey Fitzpatrick? He was a rookie with you, right?”

Delzy huffed a laugh, “Trust you to know every Centaurs player in history. Yep, that was him. We were best friends, but I was completely gone for him.”

Delzy was twisting himself back and forth in his chair with a fond expression on his face.

“Tooootally gone. And I thought maybe he was for me too. We definitely had moments, you know? Where it felt like our hugs lasted a little longer than they should, or he sat a little closer than he needed to. And I was young and horny as fuck and probably pretty stupid, and we were drinking one night right after the season ended and I kissed him. I wanted him and I just did it.”

Shane thought he knew what came next in the story, but he really hoped he was wrong.

“What did he do?” Shane whispered.

“He shoved me off him and he clocked me, and he told me to get the fuck away from him, and used a few slurs in there too.” Delzy sighed.

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah, oh shit. He only hit me the one time, but he was furious, and we never talked again. I guess I was lucky the season was over, I don’t know what would have happened if we had to keep playing together.”

“He got traded, didn’t he?”

“Yep, he requested it. Went to Vancouver, so we almost never saw each other. And I guess it was good that I fell for a guy who wasn’t

very talented, because he got knocked down to the AHL after a season and kinda just bounced around there for a while."

"Shit." Shane said again. "And you really never talked to him again?"

"Nope. I followed his career for a few years, but I have no idea where he is now."

"I'm so sorry, Delzy. That's so fucked up that he did that to you."

"Thanks, kid. I know. I didn't know it at the time, and I beat myself up about it for a while. But you know, therapy and shit, I figured it out eventually, and was able to sort of come to terms with who I am, you know? And I just keep it quiet, and find guys who don't give a shit about hockey to spend my time with."

"Yeah, that's smart…" Shane trailed off, thinking about himself and his own life. It sounded kind of miserable, hiding the way Delzy did, but he guessed that's what he would need to do too. And he considered himself lucky that Ilya was only ignoring him, not beating the shit out of him.

"But, Shane, listen."

Shane jerked his head back up.

"I don't think this is the same kind of situation. A lot has changed since back then, people your age are a lot more accepting."

"I dunno, man, I think hockey is still pretty fucking homophobic."

"Well, yeah, of course it is. But Roz, he's clearly fine still sharing a room with you, right?"

"I mean, he's avoiding me and we never talk, but I don't think he's said anything to anyone about it."

"That's the thing," Delzy said. "I think I fucked up when I told you not to talk to him. Now you're in this weird standoff, right?"

"Yeah, it fucking sucks."

"I think you just need to talk to the guy. Clear the air. You might not be as close as before, but you should at least try to be on speaking terms."

"Maybe…" Shane really didn't know. If Ilya wanted to talk to him, he

would have talked to him already, right?

“Just think about it. If you think you can stomach being just his friend —”

“I can!” Shane interjected. “I really can, I think I’ve learned my lesson now… I need to find someone who doesn’t give a shit about hockey for… other stuff.”

Delzy laughed, “Good call, bud. So yeah, try talking to the guy, try being friends again. Maybe don’t set up any romantic holiday visits to his apartment or whatever…”

“That’s not what I was trying to do!” Shane protested.

“I’m so sure,” Delzy kept laughing, and Shane joined him.

Shane felt so much lighter than when he left the bar. He felt renewed gratitude for Delzy, and now that his drunkenness was wearing off, he realized how ridiculous it was to assume Delzy had been hitting on him. Shane was just… fuck, he was really feeling desperate and that couldn’t be good. But he’d figure that out — *away* from his team.

“So, are we good?” Shane asked, hopeful.

“Yeah, bud, we’re good. Get your ass over here.” Delzy stood up and gestured to Shane who rolled his eyes, but stumbled off his bed into a bear hug from Delzy.

Just as they separated, the door clicked, and they both turned to see Ilya standing in the doorway, brows furrowed in confusion. Shane really didn’t intend to be awake when Ilya got back, and he assumed Ilya would have gone home with that girl, but here he was.

“Okay, well, I’m going to bed, so I guess I’ll leave you to it…” He raised his eyebrows at Shane in a motion that said, “good luck with that.”

On his way out the door, he patted Ilya’s shoulder and said, “Happy New Year, Roz.”

Ilya didn’t respond, and the door closed behind Delzy with another click.

“Hey,” Shane said quietly.

“Hey.” Ilya replied.

They went through the motions of getting themselves in bed without saying anything else and when the lights were out, Shane's back to Ilya's bed, he said, "happy new year, Ilya."

A moment of silence passed and Shane's stomach twisted with regret.

But then he heard Ilya say softly, "Happy new year, Shane."

And that was a good enough start.

Chapter End Notes

> Paupy and Nico, you're my rookie-fic-writer Delzy (but you give much better advice)
>
> Longest Ilya Interlude so far coming up next!

Chapter 8: Ilya Interlude #4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya was determined to treat Shane like any other teammate.

Except he was pretty friendly with his teammates in general. Not go-to-their-parents'-house friendly, but joke-around-at-practice friendly, sure.

But when Shane walked into practice the day after Christmas, Ilya knew he couldn't just go over and act like nothing had happened between them. He looked utterly miserable — like a sad little kitten. And Ilya couldn't take it, so he had to keep away.

It looked like Delzy noticed too, because he pulled Shane aside, probably to ask him what was wrong. It was the right thing for a captain to do, but Ilya was unreasonably bitter that Delzy was the one who would get to comfort Shane. Ilya was the reason Shane needed comforting in the first place.

A pang of angry jealousy shot through Ilya, his eyes fixed on the closed door they had walked through. Delzy may be subtle, but Ilya was extremely perceptive, and he had figured out Delzy's secret pretty quickly. He wondered if Shane did too. Delzy had definitely taken Shane under his wing, and Ilya was happy for Shane — he craved guidance and approval.

But Ilya had been playing hockey long enough to know that some guys hid a darker side under their friendly exterior. What did Delzy want from Shane? Was he just being a good captain, or was it more?

Fuck, Ilya needed to stop thinking about that. It wasn't his problem to solve, and he needed to focus on playing well tonight after a shit night's sleep.

Focus on hockey, not on Shane.

But the game was messy as hell and Ilya wasn't at his best. No one else was either. So he was overjoyed when Shane scored a goal off of his pass to put them in the lead, and he couldn't help but join the celebration and give Shane the smallest ounce of appreciation with a helmet tap and nod. When Shane looked at him, though, he knew it

was a mistake — all he wanted to do was hug him.

As soon as the game was over, Ilya made sure he was first down the tunnel, changed quickly into his suit without showering, and snuck out while the media was still corralled by Jessica. He couldn't talk to anyone tonight. They'd ask him about his assist on Shane's goal, and what would he say? That making assists for Shane felt like winning a gold medal every time? That Shane was the most impressive hockey player Ilya had ever seen? Not going to happen.

Ilya thought about approaching Shane the next day to clear the air. They were probably going to be rooming together again on this road trip — they both knew better than to get on Bill's bad side. He should try to find a way to smooth this over, ask Shane if they could be friends, let him know that Ilya didn't hate him.

But the next day at the airport, he watched how Shane stuck close to Hayden and avoided eye contact as much as he could. When they got their room keys, Ilya nodded at Shane, hoping to convey that he was open to reconciling, but then Shane stayed down in the lobby while Ilya went upstairs. So that's how it was going to be. Ilya had to respect it — he would give Shane space, and wait for him to come to Ilya, if he ever would again.

When he got up to the room, he flipped through the hotel booklet with nearby restaurants and bars listed. He picked a bar, changed into jeans and shirt that wasn't plane-rumpled, and left before Shane could come up. He knew how to distract himself, it had been working great for him since he was 14.

Hooking up was easy for Ilya. He was hot, he knew it, and he usually had his pick of girls who were making eyes at him at a bar. Every once in a while, he thought about going after one of the guys who made eyes at him, there were plenty of those too. But it felt a little too dangerous now — now that he was kind of a public figure. He had to be more careful about men. He could get spotted hooking up with 100 girls and no one would care, but one man could destroy his career.

He wasn't of-age in the US yet, but he looked old enough that he wasn't often ID'd on the road, so he made his way to a bar. He wasn't going to drink much anyway, they had a game the next day. He'd just nurse a beer until the right person came along. Soon enough, he caught someone's eye. He shot her a smirk and a wink and he knew he had her.

They ended up back at her apartment. Her roommates were out, she said, so they'd have privacy. Ilya felt kind of bad about it, but he didn't really care. He just really needed to get out of his head. As soon as they were in her room, he backed her against the wall.

"Is this okay?" He asked, leaning down to kiss her neck.

"Mmhmmm," she hummed with pleasure.

Ilya moved from her neck to her mouth, and as soon as his lips touched hers, he had a flash of memory.

Shane's hand on his shoulder. Shane's blush behind his freckles as he tentatively pressed his lips to Ilya's. Shane opening his mouth and moaning around Ilya's tongue.

Ilya pulled back, leaving the girl stumbling forward and looking confused. He couldn't believe he was about to do this, but he didn't think he could go through with it. He cleared his throat, and looked at her apologetically.

"I am very sorry, you are beautiful, but I need to leave." He opened her bedroom door and walked out.

"Wait, why? Did I do something? Please don't tell me you have a girlfriend or something!" She followed behind Ilya, straightening out the shirt he had been running his hands under.

"No, no girlfriend. Just… just have to go. Really, nothing about you is wrong, is me." He tried to be convincing — it wasn't this girl's fault he was losing his edge because of Shane fucking Hollander and his stupid fucking freckles. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, but he couldn't stay there.

"Yeah, okay, whatever. Bye, I guess." She shrugged, brows still furrowed in confusion.

And now Ilya was the one running away from someone's apartment after kissing them. He felt pathetic.

When he got back to the hotel, Shane was already asleep.

Ilya didn't know what he wanted. He kind of wished Shane was awake so they could talk. But he also didn't want to face Shane's melancholic eyes and pouting lips. So he was going to have to find something else to do in the evenings on this road trip if he wanted to steer clear of

any painful conversations with Shane.

In Columbus, Ilya figured out something to occupy his time. The hotel's indoor pool was closed, but he charmed one of the staff people into opening it back up just for him.

So for two nights in Columbus and one night in Minneapolis, Ilya swam laps for a few hours, just pushing himself and pushing himself. Letting the sound of the water rushing past his ears drown out his thoughts, and tiring himself out enough that he'd fall asleep fast. He could tell Shane wasn't always asleep when he returned to their room, but his back was always turned and he never greeted Ilya, so he kept up the pretense.

Their New Year's Eve game against Minnesota was infuriating. Not only because Ilya scored and they still lost, but also because Ilya knew how angry Shane would be at himself for fucking up. He wondered if Shane had been lying awake in their hotel rooms, unable to sleep with the unbroken tension radiating between them, thick and suffocating.

All he wanted to do was talk to Shane, be there for him like he had been all season. Ilya loved their strategy sessions. Shane was the only person on Ilya's wavelength about hockey. He hated to admit it to himself, but sometimes after they had their post-game analysis, he fantasized about how much fun it would be to coach hockey with Shane, how maybe one day they could open a hockey school together.

But those kinds of thoughts weren't allowed anymore. He had to shut them down. Shane didn't want to talk to Ilya, and he *had* to be okay with that.

He thought going out with the team and getting drunk for New Years would help. He was wrong.

The whole night, his eyes tracked Shane around the bar. He watched as Hayden drifted away with a girl, leaving Shane nursing a beer alone — even as Ilya himself found some pretty young thing to attempt to distract himself with. But he felt Shane's eyes boring into him as he danced with her. He internally cringed as he saw Shane order a round of shots and down one with a shudder, and cringed even more when Shane ran to the bathroom, hand over his mouth.

He drifted away from the girl he was dancing with, considering going after Shane to see if he was okay. But he just stood there, numb on the dance floor, letting the crowd jostle him. Stuck in place, unable to

move, but unable to look away from the bathroom door.

When Shane stumbled out, Ilya let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. And then suddenly, Shane was in front of him. Everyone surrounding them was counting down, but Shane was staring directly at Ilya. His questioning eyes brimming with emotion that turned to… was that anger? Before Ilya could decipher it, Shane was practically running out the door. Ilya stepped forward to follow him, but then he saw Delzy grab Shane's jacket and chase after him.

He couldn't believe fucking Conrad DelZotto was going for it with *Shane* . Ilya had always respected him, respected his loyalty to Ottawa throughout his career, and had looked forward to playing with him — hell, he enjoyed playing with him. But now the thought of him made bile rise in Ilya's throat.

He was going to take advantage of Shane's naivety and admiration for his own fucking pleasure. And it made Ilya sick because it's exactly what he was trying *not* to do. Ilya sat and fumed at the bar for a while, wondering if he should go back to the room. He finally decided that he didn't care if it made Shane uncomfortable, and he didn't care that Delzy was their captain, he couldn't let him use Shane like that.

But when he got to the room, they were just… hugging? With all their clothes on? And then Delzy just left. If they weren't fucking, what the hell was Delzy doing here? Ilya couldn't quite process the thought that he'd been wrong.

And then Shane spoke to him. All he did was say "hey" and all Ilya did was reply in kind, but it was a crack in the ice.

And when Shane whispered happy new year to him in the dark, Ilya grinned so wide he had to compose himself before responding.

"Happy new year, Shane."

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank you enough for reading and commenting

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> This chapter is rated E! Most, but not all, future chapters will have explicit scenes, you've been warned.

Chapter Notes

> I was listening to this song on repeat while I was writing the whole second half of this chapter, if you want the immersive experience.
>
> Paupy and Nico, idk what I would do without you!
>
> And seriously, everyone who has read and left kudos and comments on this fic, I love each and every one of you and am so grateful for you!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The funny thing about hangovers is how easy they are to forget about as soon as you start drinking. So Shane should have been expecting his head to feel like someone was actively hitting it with a hammer and his stomach to be lurching with every tiny movement he made — and yet he was surprised by the blinding pain and nausea.

He felt so unwell that he forgot that he and Ilya weren't talking, and he groaned, "how are you not dead?" from the tangle of blankets he was wrapped in.

Ilya looked completely fine, apparently freshly showered with wet hair, and holding a mug from their room's little coffee bar. He tilted his head curiously at Shane, and Shane remembered — oh right, things weren't normal between them. Things were weird and bad.

But, miraculously, Ilya responded. "Did not drink that much. Guess you did." He took a smug sip of coffee.

His snark was like a balm on Shane's heart. He still felt like death reheated in the microwave too many times, but Ilya had spoken to him. So things could be worse.

"Unghhhhhhh," was all Shane could manage.

He heard Ilya laugh lightly. Shane vaguely thought that Ilya really shouldn't be laughing at him given their current situation, but he was oddly pleased about it. Was the thing to break their standoff going to be Shane getting the most epic hangover of his life?

"Am going to get breakfast, Hollander. You… ah... you want some?" Ilya offered, a little awkwardly.

Shane popped his head up from under the pillow he'd thrown over it to drown out the sunlight. He suspected his hair was standing up in every possible direction and he probably smelled awful.

"Don't think I can get up right now, but thank you," Shane grumbled.

"Could bring some here for you?" The question was asking so much more than just about breakfast, and Shane's heart stuttered. Was he ready to cross this bridge? Fuck it, he needed greasy food.

"Are you…" He couldn't believe he was about to ask this. "Are you going to McDonald's?"

Shane could hear the smile in Ilya's voice as he said yes.

"Then yes, please." Shane mumbled, feeling so pathetic he could die. But he felt like he might be dead already, so what did it matter?

"Be back soon." And that was all Ilya said before Shane heard their room door click closed.

Shane couldn't decipher whether the sick feeling in his stomach and his rapid heartbeat were from a need to vomit or from his shock over the seemingly easy conversation he just had with Ilya. Just to be safe, he pulled the small garbage can over to the side of the bed — he didn't think he would make it to the bathroom.

Shane fell back into a fitful sleep, only waking when he smelled the heavenly aroma of oily hashbrowns and some kind of greasy breakfast meat. Ilya had placed Shane's food on the little desk next to the TV, and was sitting in his own bed eating. Shane crawled to the end of his bed and was just able to reach out for the bag on the desk without actually getting up. Ilya chuckled to himself, and Shane, inhibitions buried under the weight of his hangover, wouldn't let that stand.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Am laughing with you," Ilya replied with a mouthful of McGriddle.

“I’m not laughing,” Shane said grumpily while he shoved a whole hashbrown into his mouth and then moaned a little. It was exactly what he needed.

Ilya just laughed again, more fully this time.

Shane knew they needed to have a real conversation, actually talk about this awkward dance they were doing, but he really didn’t have the energy. Ilya seemed fine to let it lie for now, and Shane was grateful. He committed to trying to talk later, maybe once they got to Montreal, their last stop on this road trip. He needed time to recover if he was going to be able to play the next day. As it was, he was at risk of having to skip practice for the first time in his life.

And as if his mom could hear him merely contemplating skipping practice, Shane’s phone buzzed with a text from her.

Mom: Happy New Year, sweetie! I’m sorry about the game last night. I took some notes, but I’m sure you already know what you need to work on. I hope you had a fun night with your teammates. Tell Ilya happy new year from me and your dad. And tell him nice work on that goal from me. Text us when you make it to Montreal!

Shane rolled his eyes with a smile. Of course his mom had notes for him. He looked over at Ilya, wondering if he should give his parents’ regards, or just let it go. Seeing Ilya, sitting there on his bed, eating and looking at his phone, filled Shane with such a fondness that he had to say something.

“My uh —” Shane started and Ilya looked up expectantly. “My parents said to tell you Happy New Year. And my mom said nice work on your goal last night.”

Shane offered a tentative half smile, hoping Ilya would accept this olive branch. Ilya half-smiled back, the expression in his eyes hard to read. He took the last bite of his food and stood up to throw away the wrappers.

“Tell them thank you from me. Is very nice of them. They are good parents.”

Ilya said all of this with his back to Shane, and Shane’s heart sank at the memory of what Ilya had shared about his own family. Before Shane could reply, Ilya spoke again.

“Bus to the airport is in an hour. Probably you should shower. I will

see you down there." He grabbed his already-packed bag and suit garment bag from the closet, and left the room.

Shane continued to chew his breakfast, but had lost most of his appetite. He felt so awful for continually fucking up and putting his foot in his mouth with Ilya, and he needed to just talk to him to finally clear the air — at least about the kiss. He didn't think he could approach any conversation about his family at this point without destroying their friendship even more.

He showered and took ibuprofen and drank a ton of water, doing whatever he could to hide his hangover from the rest of the team. But when he got to the bus, he was relieved to see he wasn't alone. Especially among the younger guys, there were a lot of hoodies pulled tight over faces and eye masks on already. Some of the veterans were laughing amongst themselves about how "you'll learn to pace yourself someday," including Delzy. He shot Shane a questioning look, and Shane shrugged in response. He didn't have it in him to explain the uncertain status of his truce with Ilya.

Shane sat down in a row by himself, neither Hayden nor Ilya were on the bus yet, and he was relieved to not have to make any decisions about who to sit with. Ilya got on the bus a moment later, and Shane chewed on his lip watching as Ilya walked down the aisle. Should he make eye contact? Look away? He was still trying to decide when Ilya paused in front of him. He threw his bag on the rack above them and plopped down next to Shane, and Shane bit down on his lip even harder, trying to stop himself from smiling.

"Um…," He started, still not looking directly at Ilya. "Thanks for the food earlier. It, uh, really helped."

"Good. You needed it." Ilya's face twisted into his lethal half-smile, and Shane's heart sang.

"Yeah, I need all the help I can get." Shane huffed a laugh.

"Is okay," Ilya nodded. "I'm same."

Shane really wanted to reply, ask what Ilya meant — what help did he need? He seemed fine, better than fine even. And it did feel like a barrier had been broken earlier. So now that they were able to talk, Shane had a million things he wanted to say to Ilya. But this wasn't the place at all. He'd wait until they were alone in their hotel room in Montreal.

And it was for the best, because Hayden walked onto the bus just then, and looked over at Shane and Ilya sitting next to each other with a sigh. Hayden didn't say anything, just frowned and raised his eyebrows, implying that he knew something was going on. Shane resented Hayden's ability to read him so well already (but not well enough to know what was *really* going on).

Ilya put on his headphones and they rode in silence to the airport. On the plane, they followed the same pattern. Shane picked his seat. Ilya joined him and put on headphones. Hayden looked at Shane with suspicion.

Shane tried to sleep. His body felt like he had been skating for three hours without a break, and his head felt like it had been hit with a puck without a helmet on. His stomach kept turning like he might throw up, but he never did. Overall: absolute shit. He decided his new year's resolution would be to not drink ever again. Maybe. Definitely no more tequila shots.

Most of his teammates with similarly visibly terrible hangovers weren't going to their optional practice that afternoon, but Shane did notice the disappointed glances he, in particular, got from the coaching staff when he opted to stay back at the hotel. He was disappointing them a second day in a row, and that feeling did nothing to help the churning in his stomach. When he got up to his room, he tried to nap, but he was wrapped up in so many worries that kept ping-ponging around his head, sleeping felt impossible.

His primary concern should be about disappointing the coaches and team. He was supposed to be carrying this team with Ilya, but he failed miserably in yesterday's game, and now he was skipping practice. Shane wouldn't be surprised if they moved him down to the third line for the game tomorrow, give Ricci the 2nd line spot. He'd had an assist in the last game, which was more than Shane could say for himself.

But he was spending more time thinking about Ilya than hockey, which was probably part of the problem. He was almost grateful for the hangover for lowering his inhibitions, but now he had to actually do the hard thing and have a real conversation with Ilya. Shane started a mental script: he would start with an apology for kissing him. He'd say that he was sorry for crossing that boundary, and that he knew Ilya wasn't interested in him like that. Then he'd apologize for running away, and he'd ask if they could move forward as friends. Shane wasn't sure if he should say more — that he missed Ilya's

friendship and that he was a better player when he knew Ilya had his back, and that he hoped they could get back to how things were before.

But also… before there had been that air of… something. Something sizzling beneath the surface, begging to be let loose. Shane had no idea how to address that. He couldn't, could he? He fell into an uneasy sleep trying to imagine a scenario in which he could ask Ilya, "It seemed like you wanted to kiss me, so why did you look so horrified when I kissed you?"

His alarm went off at 5:45pm, a reminder to go down to have dinner. He saw that he also had a text from Hayden.

Hayden: guess you and roz made up

Shane: We didn't have anything to make up

Hayden: come on dude, stop lying to me

Shane: I'm not. Will you leave it alone?

Hayden: fine. but will you at least sit with me for dinner, or is it the hollander and rozanov show again?

Shane sighed. He really needed to be a better friend to Hayden, too, even if he could reconcile with Ilya. He wished they could all just be friends, but there was an animosity between Hayden and Ilya that Shane couldn't understand.

Shane: Yeah, of course. Meet me at my room, we can walk down together?

So Shane and Hayden had dinner together, and Shane finally started feeling a little bit less like a reanimated corpse thanks to the food and the company. Hayden talked about how practice went, and it was all perfectly normal. But the whole time, Shane was thinking about the conversation he was going to attempt to initiate with Ilya later that evening. Ilya came down to dinner as Shane and Hayden were finishing. They gave each other small smiles, it seemed the truce was standing. Good.

But after an hour of video games with Hayden and LaPierre in their room, Shane returned to his room to find it empty. Ilya's bags were there — he wasn't. Shane's heart sank. He didn't know why he'd thought that Ilya *wouldn't* be going off to hook up again, just because

they'd had one conversation. He felt stupid.

Instead of moping all night and trying fruitlessly to sleep while he waited for the tell-tale sound of the door clicking and Ilya showering, Shane decided to go down to the hotel's indoor pool, hoping swimming laps would clear his head without making him feel sick. He changed into workout shorts that could double as trunks and took the stairs down a few floors. The chlorine smell lingered all the way down the hall, and the sharp acidic odor was a much-needed shock to his nervous system.

But when he pushed through the double doors into the pool deck, all thoughts of a relaxing swim left his mind. There was Ilya, swimming laps alone. The splashing sounds of his arms hitting the water echoed across the tile and glass-lined enclosure, and Shane tracked the movements of his rippling back muscles and huge arms as he glided through the water gracefully.

He obviously knew that Ilya was muscular, he couldn't have avoided looking at his body in the locker room even if he wanted to. And he moved with a powerful, athletic grace on the ice, but the nature of their layers of gear meant that Shane had never seen Ilya's bare muscles moving like this as he pushed himself physically. But now he was on glorious display, and Shane's throat went dry at the sight of him.

He knew he should turn around and go back upstairs, leave Ilya to swim in peace, but he was transfixed by the smooth rhythm of Ilya's body moving through the water. He was caught off guard when Ilya swam up to the edge of the pool and pulled his head above water and threw it back to get the dripping hair off of his face, exposing his long neck. Shane tracked the water sliding down his throat, and over his clavicles, swallowing hard.

Ilya opened his eyes and immediately spotted Shane staring at him. Ilya's eyes went wide. Shane was stuck there, meeting Ilya's surprised gaze, as Ilya breathed heavily from the exertion of his swim, causing his chest to rise and fall and drawing Shane's eyes there.

Shane's mind went almost completely blank when Ilya hoisted himself out of the water and grabbed a towel to wrap around his waist, accentuating the long taper of his golden torso. His brain sputtered back to functioning when Ilya walked over to him, a hopeful realization dawning on Shane.

“Have you…” Shane swallowed thickly and tried again. “Have you been going swimming in every hotel on this trip?”

Ilya nodded, “Yes. I thought we… need space?”

“Oh… right.” Shane was suddenly breathless with the realization that Ilya had not, in fact, been out fucking his way across the Midwestern US, but had actually been swimming for possibly hours to… what? Give Shane space?

“If you want to swim, I can go now…” Ilya started, but Shane interrupted him.

“No!” Shane’s loud exclamation echoed across the room.

Ilya stopped speaking and took a half-step back, uncertainty in his expression.

“No, sorry,” Shane blinked rapidly and shook his head, quieting his voice. “You don’t need to go.”

“Okay,” was Ilya’s only response. They stood there, neither one moving, clearly not wanting to walk away from each other, but neither wanting to be the first to speak again. Shane decided that because he started this whole stupid situation by kissing Ilya, he ought to be the one to break the silence.

“Ilya,” Shane sighed, “I’ve been meaning to say that I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“Sorry for what? Are you serious?” Shane balked. Ilya just blinked at him. “Sorry for kissing you, obviously.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah… so can we—” Shane started, but Ilya cut him off again.

“I liked it.”

“Huh?” Shane was so confused, he might actually run away now. Were they speaking in different languages? What was going on?

“I liked it. Was very good kiss.”

Shane broke out into nervous laughter, sure now that he must have actually fallen asleep and this was all a dream. Ilya *liked* the kiss?

What? Shane felt crazy.

“You… wha… huh?” Shane’s mouth hung open and he looked pleadingly at Ilya, mentally begging him to say more, to explain what he meant, to clarify what the fuck he was talking about.

“You ran away after, so I thought you made a mistake, did not mean it. Did not want to make it worse. So I give you space.”

Ilya’s eyebrows crinkled in a sad expression, and Shane wanted to reach up and smooth the wrinkle above his nose.

“I thought…” Shane had to gather himself. “I thought… you looked so upset after I kissed you. Like you regretted kissing me back. Like I fucked up. That’s what happened.” He was so sure that’s how it went down, and he couldn’t really fathom the idea that he had been wrong.

Ilya shook his head rapidly while Shane spoke, splattering water all over him. “No, was just in shock, was not upset. I…” Ilya trailed off, now looking as confused as Shane felt.

Shane took a step towards him, reaching a hand out to touch Ilya’s arm, then thinking better of it and pulling his hand back.

“Ilya, are you saying you weren’t mad at me? You don’t regret it?” Shane asked, pleading almost, needing to be one hundred percent sure he was understanding.

“No, was not mad, only surprised,” Ilya smiled. He reached his hand out and didn’t hesitate like Shane had. He placed his hand gently on Shane’s cheek and swiped his thumb across the blush that was blooming there.

Shane opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, trying to speak, completely at a loss. But the cool touch of Ilya’s wet hand on Shane’s face was soothing and grounding.

“But, you like girls.” Shane muttered dumbly, eyes locked on Ilya’s.

Ilya laughed with so much affection on his face, Shane’s knees almost buckled.

“Hollander, so close minded. I like both. This is a thing, you know? Bisexual?”

It was Shane’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, I’ve heard of it.”

Ilya was still chuckling, and rubbing lightly on Shane's cheekbone, when he said, "What about you?"

This shouldn't have stumped Shane, but it did. What *about* him? He was still trying to figure that out. All he knew was that he wanted Ilya and no one else.

Shane shrugged, "I don't really know. But um… I liked kissing you?"

Ilya smirked in that self-satisfied way that always got under Shane's skin, and Shane couldn't help but blink his eyes to Ilya's pouting lips. He licked his own lips involuntarily. And then, somehow, miraculously, this definitely had to be a dream, Ilya was leaning down. Water droplets fell from a curl that had flopped back onto his forehead and splashed onto Shane's nose. But before Shane could wipe the drops away, Ilya pressed his mouth to Shane's and erased any other thoughts from his mind.

The world around them fell away and all Shane knew was the pressure of Ilya's mouth on his. He didn't notice the way Ilya's hair was continuing to soak him with pool water or the way Ilya's trunks were dripping onto Shane's feet from under his towel. His awareness was completely focused on the way Ilya's hand, still gently holding his cheek, titled Shane's face back slightly to give Ilya more access. The way Ilya's other hand pressed against Shane's hip, urging him slightly closer.

Shane was suddenly all too aware that Ilya wasn't wearing a shirt, and he took advantage of the moment to wrap his own arms around Ilya's back, pulling their bodies flush together, and it was beyond anything Shane could have imagined. The way Ilya's back muscles shifted under Shane's hands pulled a little moan out of Shane's throat, and that seemed to ignite something in Ilya, who pushed his tongue into Shane's mouth and walked him backwards until his back hit the cold tile wall.

The dampness still lingering on Ilya's skin from the pool was soaking through Shane's shirt, and he wanted so badly to pull it off and feel Ilya's skin against his. And like he was reading Shane's mind, just like he did on the ice, Ilya pushed one hand up the sleeve of Shane's dampened t-shirt to grip his shoulder, while his other hand toyed with the hem of Shane's shirt, lightly brushing his fingers on the sensitive skin there. The feeling of Ilya's hands on his bare skin was electric, sending a shiver across his whole body. Ilya laughed lightly into Shane's mouth at the feel of it, and they broke apart, just by an inch.

“Wow,” Shane whispered, blinking his eyes open to see Ilya grinning down at him.

“Yes.” Ilya breathed.

They stood there, breathing heavy, arms wrapped around each other, for a long moment, simply looking at each other in wonder. Shane didn’t want to move, didn’t want to break any of the connection points of their bodies, which felt like they were radiating heat through every inch of him. But they were in a very public place where anyone could walk in on them, and that would be really really bad.

“We should… uh… not be doing this here,” Shane said, still looking reverently up at Ilya.

“Right, yes, should go to the room.” Ilya nodded, also not moving.

“Do you have shoes or a shirt or something?” Shane laughed lightly, realization now hitting that he was getting soaked by Ilya’s dripping hair and trunks.

“Oh, shit, yes, in the room over there.” Ilya gestured to a small room that held towels and other pool equipment. He stepped back, and Shane loved how reluctant he looked to do so. “Give me one minute.”

As soon as Ilya was out of Shane’s personal space, his mind started racing. What the fuck was going on? He had come down here to clear his head, but now it was more full than ever of *Ilya, Ilya, Ilya,* and Shane was struggling to remember all the things he’d wanted to say. But they *needed* to talk. Shane needed more information. What did Ilya want? Was he really interested in men? Shane felt bad for assuming things about Ilya’s sexuality, but to be fair, he really didn’t know what was going on with his own sexuality, so he hadn’t had much brain space to contemplate Ilya’s. So he was… bisexual. Which meant all those times Shane saw him going off with girls were real. But then, he wasn’t going off with girls this whole week?

Shane was prevented from spiraling further by Ilya returning, slides on his feet and shirt in his hand. He was smiling, eyes sparkling, and Shane had to lean back against the wall again with the impact of that look. It was everything Shane had been missing this past week. Ilya was open to him again, and Shane wanted to jump in and never leave. He was maybe kind of completely fucked, wasn’t he?

“Ready?” Ilya asked with a hopeful smile.

Shane just nodded, overwhelmed, and turned to walk back to the elevator.

It was only a few floors up, but the short elevator ride felt like it lasted an hour. They kept glancing at each other, not touching, but there was a rippling energy all around them, like they were under a protective coating of want that they couldn't crack quite yet.

Ilya's long legs put him in front of Shane, and Shane could have sworn Ilya's hand was trembling when he swiped his key card. What was going to happen when the door closed behind them? *They needed to talk* . But all Shane wanted was to get his hands back on Ilya's warm skin. He'd never felt an insatiable need like this before, and he didn't know if his rational mind was strong enough to overpower it.

But his worrying was irrelevant, because the instant the door closed, Ilya had him pushed back against the wall next to the door, hands sliding back under Shane's shirt and grinning down at him with fire in his eyes. It was all Shane could do to hold in a whimper with Ilya looking at him like that. He now fully understood why every single girl Ilya flirted with was more than willing to take him home.

"Hollander," Ilya whispered. "Shane."

"Ilya." Shane couldn't help the smile that sneaked across his face, he couldn't suppress the little giggle that bubbled out of him, and he looked down, almost uncomfortable with the heat of Ilya's gaze. Ilya put a finger under Shane's chin, tilting his head back up so he couldn't look away.

Ilya kissed him again, this time a tender thing that unfurled slowly. Shane melted into it, allowing Ilya to guide them to the edge of the bed Shane had been napping in before. He used the hands still under the hem of Shane's shirt to pull it all the way off of him, and then they were both without shirts, chests heaving.

Shane instinctively sat and backed up on the bed and Ilya crashed into him, pushing him down with the full weight of his large body, and Shane trembled under him, losing control of all his senses already. Ilya now had both of his hands threaded into Shane's hair, cradling the back of his head as he pressed wet kisses up Shane's jaw and nipped at his earlobe, making Shane giggle and shiver again. He moved to the other side, nipping at that ear too, before putting his mouth back on Shane's and invading it with a hot slick swipe of his tongue.

Shane moaned into Ilya's mouth, hands grazing up and down his back, feeling the twist of muscles as Ilya moved above him. It felt inevitable when Shane spread his legs open and Ilya fell comfortably between them. Shane was so keenly aware of everywhere they were touching, but also everywhere they weren't. Ilya kept his hips slightly raised, avoiding contact with Shane's own hips, and Shane's need for pressure there had him almost bucking up in search of contact. He held back, just conscious enough to know that was another boundary they should discuss before crossing.

Eventually Ilya pulled his mouth off of Shane's, heaving breaths and holding himself up on his hands, resting his forehead against Shane's.

"This okay?" He asked.

Shane bit his lips between his teeth, trying not to laugh with how very fucking okay this was. He nodded, and allowed the grin to spread — and he was met with a matching one from Ilya.

"It's better than okay." Shane answered. "But we should… should we talk?"

He really didn't want to stop, unsure where this momentum would take them, and desperately wanting to find out. But Shane needed at least a little bit of clarity. He couldn't have this and lose it again without ever actually talking to Ilya about it.

But Ilya chose that moment to finally lower his hips and Shane gasped at the feeling of him, hard and thick in his still-damp shorts, rubbing slightly against Shane's own straining erection. His eyes fluttered shut, too overwhelmed to look at Ilya's beautiful face and feel him like that at the same time.

"Talk later?" Ilya asked, nuzzling into Shane's neck.

Shane responded by shifting his hips up, pressing into Ilya and rocking slightly, already on edge from this slight contact. "Yeah… later," he breathed.

Ilya grumbled, "good" before taking Shane's mouth again, his full weight now pressing Shane down into the mattress, just like he'd imagined in his childhood bedroom on Christmas. Being completely enveloped like this was so overwhelmingly good, Shane almost thought he felt tears prickling behind his eyelids. It was everything he never knew he needed, everything he wanted from Ilya — and Ilya only.

Their kisses got messier, more feverish, and Shane raked his hands up into Ilya's curls, finally, *finally* getting to feel them. They were damp from the pool, but somehow still silky and thick. Ilya moaned into Shane's mouth and rolled his hips at the feeling of Shane pulling slightly on his scalp, which made Shane moan right along with him.

Ilya pulled his mouth from Shane's and started kissing down his jaw, nipping little bites and then soothing them with his tongue, never biting enough for it to show up later, but enough for Shane to whimper with need.

"Oh god, Ilya, that feels so good." Shane could feel Ilya's smile as he kissed his clavicle and hummed his appreciation.

He lightly tugged Ilya's hair again to urge him back up to his mouth — he needed more. Shane was overcome with need, and he wrapped his strong thighs tight around Ilya, pushing and shifting them so that Ilya was flat on his back with Shane straddling him. Shane smashed his mouth back down on Ilya's, feeling like he could never have enough of Ilya's tongue in his mouth, Ilya's hands all over him, the hard press of Ilya's cock against his own.

They stayed like that for several minutes, or was it hours? Kissing, soft and sweet then rough and needy, holding each other by the hair, the arms, the hips and waist. Shane sat up to breathe after what felt like an eternity, and he felt the slight burn on his chin from Ilya's stubble, a sensation he was surprised to find he enjoyed. He was painfully hard, but was apprehensive to do anything about it.

So far, just kissing and touching hadn't been very different than what Shane had done with girls. Except for the part where it felt *completely* different. *This is how it was supposed to feel.* Like he was on fire and he needed more, but wanted release, but also never wanted it to end. And the part where their hard dicks kept rubbing together. *That* was different and so fucking good. He looked down at Ilya under him, hair a mess from a combination of chlorine and Shane's hands, eyes wide and hungry, full lips red and spit-slick. He was like a vision from a dream Shane had — in fact, Shane was sure he had dreamed this exact scenario multiple times.

Ilya was smiling up at him, half-dazed, and was rubbing his hands up and down Shane's thighs, which were spread wide across Ilya's hips. He looked drunk with lust, and Shane was sure he looked the same.

"You are very beautiful," Ilya whispered in his lilting Russian accent

that Shane loved so much. And hearing those words directed at him brought the prickle of tears back to his eyes.

“You are… Ilya, you’re…” Shane didn’t know what to say, he didn’t have the words for how devastatingly hot and painfully gorgeous he found Ilya, especially in that moment when his head was fuzzy with desire. Instead, he started shifting himself down Ilya’s body. He didn’t have the words, so he would *show* Ilya how much he wanted him, show Ilya that he could have whatever he wanted of Shane.

Shane had been thinking about this for so long now, how Ilya might feel in his mouth, what it would be like to bring Ilya to the brink, how it would feel to push him over the edge. He wanted it so bad, and this might be his only chance. They hadn’t had the conversation Shane wanted to have, but he was going to get this even if it was the last he got of Ilya.

“Shane, what? You do not have to—” Ilya tried to ask while Shane settled between his legs, but Shane shook his head.

“Please, let me do this. For you. For me.” Shane’s breaths were short, he felt a lump in his throat, afraid Ilya might push him away. But Ilya just nodded and reached down to stroke Shane’s cheek with his thumb again.

Shane took a deep breath, and focused on Ilya’s erection pressing against his shorts. Shane stroked it over the fabric a few times, in awe of the way it made Ilya gasp and twitch. He delicately curled his fingers into the waistband and slowly slid it down Ilya’s thighs, revealing his impressive cock. Fear bubbled up in Shane’s stomach, with the realization of just how big Ilya was and the fact that Shane had never done this before.

Ilya must have noticed, because he furrowed his brow and asked, “Okay?”

Shane just nodded.

“You do not have to, I am happy to… whatever you want.” Ilya said emphatically.

“I just…” Shane huffed a little laugh. “I’ve never done this before.” He smiled timidly up at Ilya. “I want to do a good job for you.”

Ilya groaned, “Fuck Shane. You will. I know you will.”

Shane nodded again and licked his lips, returning his gaze to Ilya's cock in front of him. He tried to let instinct take over. He started by placing a delicate kiss right on the head, and Ilya hissed out a breath, which seemed encouraging. Then he stuck out his tongue and licked from the base to the tip, taking in the sensation and taste. It was a little chlorine-tinged from the pool, but Shane didn't mind, and the noise Ilya made was enough to make Shane's own dick twitch. He licked another long stripe, and was feeling more bold now that he'd broken the ice, so he swirled his tongue around the head, remembering how good that felt when his girlfriend had done it. Shit, he needed to get her out of his mind. This was about Ilya.

Ilya seemed to enjoy the tongue swirl, so Shane did it again and saw Ilya grip the sheets on the bed in his fists, knuckles white. This boosted Shane's confidence even more and he finally slid his mouth completely onto Ilya's cock. It was so big, and Shane wasn't sure how deep he could go, so he focused on the first couple of inches, sliding up and down, swiping his tongue to get Ilya slick and wet. He pulled off and used his hand to spread the wetness over Ilya's full shaft, and Ilya groaned out a long "fuuuuuck."

Shane took him back in his mouth and started bobbing and humming appreciatively around Ilya, eliciting a long string of moans and Russian words Shane didn't know, but they sounded *good* . Shane began moving faster, sliding his hand up to meet his mouth with every stroke, and Ilya reached out a hand to run it through Shane's hair, brushing it out of his face.

Shane looked up at Ilya, and nearly made a mess of himself at the sight of him. His mouth was hanging open, lips still red and swollen, cheeks flushed with color, and his eyes were blazing with heat.

"Shane, oh god, fuck Shane, I'm—" Shane understood, Ilya was about to come. He didn't think he was ready to have him finish in his mouth, so he pulled off and stroked Ilya over the edge. Ilya let out another jumble of Russian and English expletives, arching his back, his release splattering onto his stomach. Shane continued stroking until Ilya collapsed hard back on the bed.

Shane sat up on his knees admiring the absolute mess he had made of this beautiful man before him. His own cock was pushing hard against his shorts, but he was more than happy to just watch Ilya in all his glory for the moment.

After a minute or so, Ilya seemed to gather himself and looked

accusingly at Shane.

“What? What’s wrong?” Shane asked, terrified he did something wrong.

“You are good at everything Hollander, is not fair. You say ‘I never done this before’ and then give perfect blowjob the first time. Perfect Hollander, as always.”

Ilya seemed genuinely annoyed, and Shane was absolutely losing it with laughter. He doubled over holding his stomach with how hard he was laughing.

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry,” He said when he was finally able to speak. “I should have bitten your dick off or something.”

Ilya grinned wickedly and said, “Yes, would be better. More fair.”

Shane sighed with blissful happiness. He didn’t even need to come — seeing Ilya like this, laughing with him, was as close to perfect as a moment could get. He moved up the bed to lie next to Ilya, who had leaned over to grab a tissue and wipe himself up.

Ilya tossed the tissue aside, and propped himself up on an elbow, looking down at Shane with his twisted half smile.

“I think is my turn now, yes?” He waggled his eyebrows at Shane, making Shane giggle, but the nerves that had finally dissipated came rushing back at the thought of Ilya returning the favor.

“Oh, um, you don’t have to.” Shane smiled shyly up at Ilya. “I’m okay. That was… what I wanted.”

“Fuck Hollander,” Ilya muttered, eyes blazing again. Then he gestured down the bed, where Shane’s erection was clearly jutting up in his shorts. “You are not ‘okay.’ I will take care of you.”

Shane shuddered at those words, surprised by how much they turned him on. Why was he hot for Ilya saying he’d take care of him? He knew it was about sex, but there was a buried implication that Shane should know better than to cling to.

Ilya moved down his body with a practiced ease, kissing a trail down Shane’s neck, passing his tongue over each nipple, and then continuing his kisses down to the waistband of his shorts. Shane wondered if maybe Ilya *had* done this before, and he felt a pang of

jealousy — who would he have done this with? Why hadn't Shane known this about Ilya? He tried to push those thoughts away and focus on the fact that Ilya was pulling off his shorts and Ilya's mouth was inches away from his dick.

Shane breathed deeply through his nose, trying to steady himself so he didn't explode the second Ilya's mouth was on him, which he feared might be inevitable. Ilya spread his tongue wide, and licked a wide slow stripe up Shane's cock, never breaking eye contact with Shane. This was something Shane had experienced before, but the slate was wiped completely clean — nothing any girl had ever done to him compared to this. Ilya licked him again and Shane shuddered.

"Ilya please." Shane whispered. He didn't mean to, he was mortified, but he *needed* so much in that moment.

Ilya acquiesced and swallowed Shane down, hallowing his cheeks and sucking back up slowly, moaning onto Shane's cock, and his eyes fluttered closed. Was Ilya enjoying this as much as Shane was? There was something so hot about that, Shane was already on the edge.

"Oh fuck, I'm so close, fuck," Shane was mumbling between moans as Ilya bobbed on him. He gripped the sheets tightly, then remembered how good it felt to have Ilya's hands in his hair while he was doing this, and he reached out to brush Ilya's curls. But he ended up gripping more tightly than he intended because, at the same moment, Ilya reached his hand over to gently caress Shane's balls, and that was just too much.

He whimpered as he spilled into Ilya's mouth, eyes wide on Ilya, who kept his mouth there, lightly sucking, until Shane was spent. Ilya pulled off of him, and began placing delicate kisses on the insides of Shane's thighs, the crease of his hips and the little divot there, and then back up his torso until he was looming over Shane again.

His lips were swollen and ruddy, and his eyes were sparkling. Shane felt stupid with pleasure, and all he could do was stare at Ilya in awe.

"Holy shit… that was… fuck, Ilya," Shane ducked his head as he felt his cheeks heating.

"Is a reason I am first line and you are second. Just a little bit better." Ilya smirked down at him and kissed him before the squawk of protest could leave Shane's mouth. Shane sighed into it, annoyance at the chirp melting away with the taste of himself on Ilya's tongue, which was heady and made him feel so dirty in a way he relished.

Ilya broke the kiss, and flopped himself back onto the mattress so he was facing Shane. They just looked at each other with goofy happy faces for a minute, and then the inevitable worry started to creep back up on Shane.

“So,” he started tentatively. “We should definitely talk now.”

Ilya sighed, and Shane understood his reluctance. But they just did something kind of crazy, and Shane needed some sort of clarity or he would combust.

“Yes, okay,” Ilya said.

“Actually…” Shane had just realized that they were both naked, and now that the heat of the moment had mostly passed, that felt very awkward. He didn’t want to get up to get them underwear, so he pulled the topsheet over them both. It made the moment kind of cozy, and Shane felt warm and fuzzy all over.

“So,” he started again, smiling this time. “Um… so you didn’t hate it when I kissed you?”

Ilya rolled his eyes with a smile, “Obviously no.”

“Okay, but… why didn’t you say anything to me this whole week? I thought you hated me.”

“You freaked out, and felt like you were avoiding me, so I did not want to… what is it? I dunno the words. I thought you want me to leave you alone.”

“Oh… I’m sorry about that.” Shane furrowed his brow. Had he been the one being standoffish to Ilya? Shane thought he was matching Ilya’s energy, but maybe it was the other way around. He was miserable and playing like shit this week for no reason. Delzy was right, his advice was terrible. Fuck.

“You know,” Shane looked away, too embarrassed to look Ilya in the eye. “I thought you were going out and hooking up with girls this whole trip. I’m kinda glad you were just swimming.” Shane felt himself blushing again, but he didn’t care. He wanted Ilya to know.

Ilya huffed a small laugh, “I did, one night, I tried. But I…” He trailed off, suddenly looking uncertain.

“You what?” Shane nudged him.

“Nothing… just did not hook up that night.”

“Oh, okay. Um. Good.” Shane bit his lip and looked back up at Ilya. His eyes were soft and sweet, and Shane wanted to drown in them. Ilya reached a hand up and swiped his thumb across Shane’s cheekbone again.

“You keep doing that.” Shane smiled.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I like it. I just… noticed.”

“Your freckles,” Ilya shrugged.

“My freckles? You like them? I’ve always hated them.”

“No, Hollander, they are so good!” Ilya protested. “I like them so much. So cute.”

Shane was sure he was beet red at this point, overwhelmed with the way Ilya was touching him, talking to him, being so affectionate. He was so much softer than Shane had ever seen him.

“Okay then. I guess I like them now.” Shane shrugged. If Ilya liked them, his freckles were his favorite feature now.

Ilya grinned, and leaned in to kiss Shane’s cheeks, one then the other, then he kissed his forehead, and finally, his mouth. Shane inched closer to Ilya, and reached his hand up into his hair. It was a tangle of knots, but Shane didn’t care, he loved the feeling of it between his fingers. Ilya moved his hand from Shane’s face to wrap his arm around Shane and tug him even closer, and Shane swiped his tongue across Ilya’s lips, sliding in to deepen the kiss. They continued kissing and holding each other like that for several seconds, until Shane pulled away again.

“Fuck, I love kissing you,” He whispered, lips still brushing Ilya’s. Ilya hummed in response and pulled Shane back to his mouth, but Shane resisted.

“No, hold on,” Shane said, breathless. “We need to talk still.”

Ilya groaned and sighed again, “Okay okay, what else?”

Shane laughed at how impatient he was, it was so annoying but somehow incredibly adorable.

“Well, you know… This… whatever this is? What is this? What are we doing?”

“Kissing. Blowjobs. Good stuff.” Ilya shrugged.

Now Shane rolled his eyes. “Yeah, duh, I know that, but like… is this just a one time thing? Do you…” Shane was suddenly nervous with the weight of the question on the tip of his tongue. “Do you want to keep doing this?”

“Yes, want to keep doing this *right now* ,” Ilya nuzzled into Shane’s neck to emphasize his point.

“Ilya!” Shane giggled and kicked his feet a little, trying to wriggle away.

“Shane!” Ilya tittered, imitating Shane’s giggles.

Shane thought he might turn permanently red with how much he was blushing, he didn’t know how to handle Ilya teasing him *here* , naked in bed together.

“Stop, I’m trying to be serious!” He would have been more effective at protesting if he wasn’t still giggling while he said it.

Ilya just kept touching him, but Shane needed to get this out.

“We have to keep being teammates, right? We have to… leave this hotel room and play a game against Montreal tomorrow. And obviously we can’t tell anyone about this. But like… I don’t want to pretend this never happened, do you?”

Ilya stopped trying to kiss and nuzzle him, and looked at him more seriously. “No. We cannot tell anyone. Would be very bad. For careers, but also for me in Russia.”

“Right…” Shane hadn’t even thought about that, the implications were far scarier for Ilya. “So… you don’t want to do it again?” His heart fell, even as he knew it was the right thing to do.

“Did not say that…” Ilya hedged. “But maybe… maybe only when we share a room? So is private? No one will know?”

Relief and hope washed over Shane. He would take what he could fucking get, because at this point, the thought of never doing this again felt like a death sentence. How could he survive without Ilya’s

hands on him, Ilya's *mouth* on him, now that he'd experienced it?

"Sure, yeah, that could work." Shane nodded, biting his lips between his teeth to stop himself from smiling too wide.

"Okay so… I can kiss you now?" Ilya asked, impatience winning out.

Shane laughed, "Yeah, you can kiss me now. You can kiss me all night, if you want."

Ilya raised his eyebrows suggestively, and Shane shut him up with a bruising kiss, pushing him back on the bed. They made out for a bit, and then fatigue finally took over — Shane had almost forgotten he was still recovering from that brutal hangover. His eyes started drooping and he knew they needed to sleep if they wanted to be ready for practice in the morning.

He reluctantly got out of bed, pulled on some pajamas, and went to brush his teeth, Ilya following close behind — still naked. Shane deployed his reliable locker room tactics to avoid looking at Ilya too much, he didn't want to give in to the temptation Ilya was obviously presenting to him. They made eye contact in the mirror as they brushed, and Shane felt his heart beating out of his chest with how fucking happy he suddenly was. He could have this. He could have *Ilya.* Not all of him, not all the time. But it was so much more than he ever thought would be possible.

They left the bathroom, and Ilya put on some boxers to sleep in. Shane pulled down the covers of the bed they'd been in and, to his shock, Ilya followed. Left the other bed completely untouched, and crawled in behind Shane.

"Oh!" Shane said in surprise, looking over his shoulder.

"This okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yes, sorry, yes, so okay," Shane nodded fervently.

Ilya wrapped his arm around Shane's waist and tugged until his back was flush with Ilya's chest. He settled down into the cozy bed and nuzzled into Shane's hair and within minutes, his breathing was slow and steady — he was already asleep. It took Shane a little bit longer to fall asleep, because he couldn't stop grinning. He was trying so hard to temper his giddiness, but he'd just have to try again in the morning. There was no containing it tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Commissioned some *incredible* fanart of the pool scene!

Chapter 10: Ilya Interlude #5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ilya woke up in Montreal with Shane Hollander wrapped in his arms. What the fuck had he done?

So much had changed since the clock struck midnight and they rang in 2011 staring each other down in that bar in Minneapolis, and Ilya was reeling.

He mentally tallied the series of events that brought them to this moment.

- When Ilya returned to their room on New Year's Eve, Delzy *wasn't* seducing Shane. What was he doing? Just… being nice? Weird but okay.
- Shane greeted him *and* said Happy New Year, making Ilya suddenly so happy about Shane over-drinking.
- Jesus Christ, grumpy, hungover Shane Hollander was somehow more adorable than regular grumpy Shane Hollander, how was that possible? So of course Ilya had to offer to bring him breakfast. You look at Shane Hollander with his hair all mussed up and wrapped up in blankets and grumbling and just *try* to not bring him hashbrowns.
- That fucking text from Shane's parents, the perfect fucking family. Wishing their son Happy New Year, but also thinking of Ilya and congratulating him on his goal. What the fuck was that? Who did that? Definitely not his family. He heard nothing from his father or Andrei, but he was sure he would today — his father asking why he didn't call for New Year's Day. Or Andrei asking for more money *and* asking why he didn't call.
- So maybe that broke Ilya a little and maybe he wanted a bit of comfort, so he sat next to Shane on the bus and the warmth of Shane's body next to his seeped into him and eased the pain of having to think about his garbage family. He was so sick of feeling unworthy and letting them weigh him down. He wanted to deserve Shane's warmth.
- And then Shane walked onto that pool deck, shock and lust clear on his face, and Ilya had to say fuck it. He wasn't going to deny himself, he wasn't going to think about consequences, he was going to *take.*

Now here they were, cuddled up in bed, and Ilya was, once again, fucked. Because how was Shane Hollander a blowjob expert on day one? That alone was unfair. But the way he looked when he was coming — that was even more unfair. Ilya was basically powerless to resist. Now that he'd had a taste, and fuck did he taste good, he was more insatiable than ever. All he could think about now was fucking Shane, being inside of him and taking him to the brink. Fuck.

He really hadn't wanted to have the conversation Shane kept insisting they have, and he felt bad for not being 100% honest — about how he had to run away from that girl's apartment because he couldn't stop thinking about Shane, or about how he was afraid of falling for Shane because he knew this could never actually work, never actually be anything real.

So he hedged and came up with a plan that might work. Hooking up on the road, never at home. Keeping it a secret, but still having time together. That could work. Ilya was ready to stop hooking up with other people, at least for the rest of the season, until he went back to Russia for the summer. And maybe by then, they would have both gotten this out of their systems, and they could just be friends and teammates who used to fuck.

There was no way they could keep it up, anyway. Someone was bound to find out, and Ilya knew that Shane would never do anything to compromise his career. That was part of what drew Ilya to him in the first place. No one was as committed to hockey as Shane, and fuck if that wasn't hot.

Ilya hated how hot it was, how hot everything about Shane was — his obsessive dedication to hockey and perfecting his game, the way he took things so seriously even when the rest of the team was trying to have fun, the way Ilya could niggle him enough that he actually laughed, the way he fucking whimpered Ilya's name — all of it would be Ilya's ruin if he didn't give this thing they were doing a container.

But for now, Ilya was going to do something he rarely did. He was going to let himself have exactly what he wanted, and it would be good, and he would be — however temporarily — content.

He breathed deeply, unable to resist nuzzling into Shane's silky hair, which smelled delicious, probably some fancy-ass shampoo that people with pretty hair and perfect skin and adorable freckles used. Shane grumbled in his sleep, not quite awake, and turned over in Ilya's arms, and Ilya could feel Shane's breath tickling his chest. He

closed his eyes and tried to hold on to this moment, so he could keep this memory for long after this had to end.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the well-wishes! AND THANK YOU FOR READING!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

And we're back!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When they got back from Montreal, the days passed painfully slowly. Shane thought he might combust with the need to touch Ilya again. Something within Shane had been unleashed, and he couldn't rein it back in — every time he saw Ilya off the ice, he had flashes of their night together: Ilya's thumb brushing his cheek, Ilya moaning in Russian and coming all over his own stomach, Ilya telling Shane he was beautiful.

Shane was trying not to think too much about what their hookup *meant*, because it probably didn't mean anything other than the obvious: they were both young guys who were attracted to each other and wanted to get off. Ilya was a safe person to explore with, and that's all. A friend, someone he was already sharing hotel rooms with anyway. That's definitely all it meant to Ilya, Shane was sure. And sleeping together and cuddling… well, Shane couldn't think too deeply about that without spiraling dangerously close to hope.

The biggest upside of their hookup (besides the mindblowing sex) was that hockey was *fun* again, and Shane was playing better than ever. They'd destroyed Montreal, with Shane and Ilya getting two goals each, contributing to a 6-2 win. They were back to cellies together, strategizing on the bench, and being, well, friends. Shane kept avoiding him in the locker room, though, because he didn't need that kind of temptation.

He was avoiding Delzy too, because Delzy obviously noticed that Shane and Ilya were back on speaking terms. And based on Shane's mood, he feared Delzy would easily be able to guess exactly what had happened — he thought Delzy might be some kind of mind-reader, he always seemed to know what Shane was thinking.

Shane was walking a tightrope. Ilya didn't know Delzy was gay, and Shane wouldn't out him, not even to Ilya. Ilya also didn't know that Shane had panicked and told Delzy everything that happened on Christmas — he feared Ilya would be furious if he knew. And Shane couldn't betray Ilya's trust further by telling Delzy the truth about

how they reconciled.

It all felt very messy in Shane's head. Hockey used to be the only thing up there, but now it was all muddled with Ilya and his lush mouth and strong arms, and the fear of being found out. Add in Delzy's sidelong glances and Hayden's knowing looks and his mom always asking after Ilya when they talked, Shane was unusually distracted off the ice. So when their coach called for everyone's attention in the dressing room a couple of days later, Shane was surprised to hear him announcing the team's selections for the upcoming NHL All-Star Game.

"Okay, gentlemen, you know how this goes. We pick two players to go to All-Stars, and then the PR team will do whatever they do to push for some of you to be the fan vote. So, let's cut to the chase. The Centaurs are sending… Conrad DelZotto—"

There was a loud uproar of cheers and the rumble of sticks hitting the floor for Delzy (although it was a given that the captain would attend.)

"And, the first rookie we've sent to the All-Star game *since* Delzy—"

Shane's breath hitched. He had been so distracted, he forgot that he wanted this. Really bad. On his mental checklist of accomplishments he wanted to achieve his rookie year, making the All-Star team was pretty high up there.

"Ilya Rozanov!" Coach finished.

The room roared with cheers again, and Ilya smirked his fucking adorable half-smile, and bowed and saluted without an ounce of humility or modesty. Shane's heart simultaneously sank with disappointment and soared with pride for Ilya. He just wished it could have been the two of them together. Ilya caught Shane's eye and his confident grin faltered ever so slightly. But Shane shook his head, biting his lip and smiling, and nodded his chin at Ilya, as if to say "you deserve it."

Ilya *did* deserve it. It's just that Shane thought he did too.

"All right, great job, boys. This is not to leave this room until the formal announcement this week. The PR team will have more details about all that. Let's get to practice."

Shane turned to grab his stick when he heard Coach say his name.

“Hollander, you got a minute?”

Fuck. What could this be about?

“Of course, coach, what’s up?”

“Follow me.” Coach walked towards his office, and Shane clomped behind on his skates. His mind started racing. Was he going to finally tell Shane off for his abysmal performance in those games the previous week?

When they got to his office, Jessica, the PR manager, was waiting there. His coach walked back towards the ice, leaving Shane with her.

“Hi Shane, thanks for taking a few minutes to talk.”

Shane nodded, unsure when he had agreed to take a few minutes to talk with her. “Uh, sure, no problem.”

“As you now know, you were not selected to go to the All-Star Game.”

Shane grimaced. Why did she have to bring it up like that?

“But, the Centaurs organization strongly believes that you will easily be at the top of the fan vote, and we are going to do everything we can to make that happen.”

Shane was taken aback, but flattered and relieved. He had been momentarily scared that the team was regretting drafting him. But this was exciting! If not a little terrifying. Ilya would have been a much better choice to push for the fan vote, Shane thought. The fans already loved him so much, Shane wouldn’t be surprised if there were more Rozanov jerseys than DelZotto ones sold this year. He was charming and funny and hot and… this was not the time for that train of thought.

“Wow, cool, uh, thank you,” Shane replied awkwardly. “So, um, what do I have to do?”

“You don’t have to do much,” Jessica smiled kindly, clearly aware that Shane would be nervous. “We’ll post a feature about you on the team’s website, get you an interview on TSN, and make a short video to air during intermissions at the upcoming home games to remind fans to vote for you. All you have to do is smile for the cameras and play like you usually do, and it should be a shoo-in. Any questions?”

“Um,” was all Shane could think to say. He was slightly overwhelmed by all of this, not used to having to sell himself as a player. He chewed his lip and thought about it, but he came up with nothing other than, *“Why did the team pick Ilya and not me?”* and he knew she wouldn’t know the answer to that question, or give it to him if she did.

So all he said was, “I guess not?”

“Don’t worry Shane, I’ll be here to help through all of it, and we have already talked to your agent about it, and she’s on board. We’ll get you to LA.”

That boosted Shane’s mood and his confidence. “Cool, thank you, Jessica. It means a lot to me.”

She smiled again, with a motherly look in her eyes, despite being less than a decade older than Shane. “Of course. I’ll be in touch later in the week when you’re back from this trip to schedule everything.”

As soon as practice ended, both Ilya and Hayden approached Shane, shooting glares at each other as they did. He looked up at both of them from the bench in the dressing room.

“What’s up guys?” Shane asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“What did coach —”

“Where did you —”

They both started talking at the same time and Shane rolled his eyes, already knowing the question.

“I was talking to Jessica from PR about a campaign to get the fans to vote me into the All-Star Game.”

“Nice!” Hayden grinned. “I’ll totally vote for you, bud.”

Ilya looked at Hayden with a raised eyebrow. “You will not vote for yourself?”

“Oh, uh, I hadn’t even thought of that…” Hayden trailed off.

Ilya rolled his eyes and said, “Of course not. Well, is good, you will not win anyway.”

“Hey!” Hayden shoved him.

“Could you guys go fight each other somewhere else so I can get changed?” Shane asked, exasperated.

Hayden walked away, clearly assuming Ilya would follow, but he sat down next to Shane instead. This was the first time they’d been this close off the ice since they woke up together in Montreal. Shane’s heart was racing already. He dared a glance at Ilya next to him, and had to bite both lips between his teeth to contain himself.

“Is good you will have the fan vote.” Ilya said.

“You think so?”

“Da, yes,” Ilya shrugged. “Is obvious.”

Shane beamed at him. “I mean, I hope so. Jessica seems to think I’ll get voted in no problem.”

“You will,” Ilya said with another shrug.

Shane blushed and beamed even harder. Ilya’s easy confidence in him made it really hard to not lean over and kiss him. Looking down at his skates, Shane said, “It would be cool to get to go to LA together.”

He said it quietly, not wanting anyone else to hear him, and he chanced a glance at Ilya. Shane’s breath caught when he saw the crooked smirk on Ilya’s face and fire in his eyes.

“Yes, would be very fun, I think.” Ilya hummed in agreement.

Shane felt the blood rushing to his dick at the mere implication of what they might get up to in a luxury hotel in Los Angeles, and he remembered why he’d been avoiding Ilya in the locker room. He definitely wouldn’t be able to get up and shower now.

Shane stood and turned to face his stall, whispering to Ilya out of the corner of his mouth, “You have to stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what? I am looking at you normal.”

“No you’re definitely not.” He muttered, trying and failing to glare at Ilya.

Ilya stood too, and nudged Shane gently with his elbow, and whispered back, “See you on the flight to New Jersey,” before he returned to his own stall and started undressing. Shane pointedly avoided watching him walk away and into the showers. He figured

he'd just shower at home anyway.

He *did* need to congratulate Delzy, but Shane could do that from home too. Over text.

Shane: congrats all star!

Delzy: why are you ignoring me?

Shane: ur welcome

Delzy: hollander…

Shane: what

Delzy: stop being an idiot. tell me whats up with you and roz

Shane: i dunno know what ur talking abt

Delzy: seriously?

Shane: we made up, we r friends again like u said we shld be that's all

Delzy: you are a bad liar even over text

Shane didn't respond. He should have known Delzy would grill him over text as much as he would face-to-face. Whatever, this was none of his business. Maybe Shane had made it his business on Christmas, but he thought it would be better to share less with Delzy in general anyway. He had to stop running to him for all his problems. Well… Ilya-related problems. Of which there were currently none.

He smiled to himself thinking about that as he packed up his bag for their flight to Newark. Shane began to fantasize about what would happen when he and Ilya were finally alone together in their room. He was going to have to hold himself back from pouncing on Ilya the second the door closed. He needed to keep at least a little cool, he was so overeager last time, practically begging Ilya to let him suck him off. Now that it was settled that they were *doing this*, Shane should try to contain his excitement. Try to be coy, even.

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Yeah, Shane was not capable of being coy. Thankfully, Ilya didn't really give him a chance to try. They walked into their room quietly, and Shane immediately started unpacking, wanting to hang his suit up quickly to avoid wrinkles. He felt Ilya's eyes on him as he walked to

the closet, and when he closed the door and turned around, Ilya was right there, in his space, arms bracketing him against the closet door with hands on either side of Shane's face.

"Hi," he said with a crooked smile.

"Oh. Hi." Shane replied, chest heaving so much it touched Ilya's with every inhale.

Ilya leaned down to brush his lips against Shane's ear and whisper, "Have been waiting for this all week."

Shane shivered, from the feeling of Ilya's breath tickling him, but also from his words. Knowing Ilya had been anticipating this as anxiously as Shane was, that he wanted it just as much. Heat shot through Shane and he breathed his reply.

"Me too."

In an instant, Ilya was kissing down from Shane's ear to his neck, wet kisses and swipes of his tongue that made him shaky with need. Shane tilted his head back to give him more room.

"It's all I can think about," Shane admitted on a sigh, completely uncool, and he didn't care one bit. He slid his hands up Ilya's chest, feeling the hard planes of Ilya's shoulders flex under his fingers, and feeling himself salivate — he needed to get his mouth on Ilya soon.

Ilya pulled back with his eyebrows raised and lips tipping up in a flirty smile. "Oh yes?"

Shane bit his lip, embarrassed at the acknowledgment of his too-eager admission.

"Yeah," he said with a small shrug.

"What have you thought about, Hollander?" Ilya's flirty smile stretched wide across his face now, his eyes dancing with a teasing delight, clearly relishing making Shane squirm.

"I dunno… just, like kissing you and stuff."

"That is all?" Ilya asked, disbelieving.

"Oh my god, you want me to say it out loud?"

Ilya nodded and whispered "tell me" before leaning in to begin kissing

the other side of Shane's jaw and neck.

"I… mmm yeah that feels good… I don't know, I thought about you sucking me. Fuck, I thought about that a lot."

"What else?" Ilya pushed his hands up just under the hem of Shane's shirt, and Shane struggled to keep his breathing steady between words with the feeling of Ilya's rough, calloused fingers brushing across his skin.

"Ah fuck… um… I thought about you… um… coming… in my mouth."

Ilya scraped his teeth along Shane's neck when he said it, and it sent a tingle down Shane's spine — was Ilya getting turned on by Shane saying this stuff?

"It was so hot… when you did that… I want to do it for you."

Ilya smashed his mouth into Shane's then, causing Shane to let out a surprised high-pitched moan. But he needed *more* — he gripped Ilya's hips and pushed him back toward a bed.

As he moved them, Shane asked, "What about you, were you thinking about me too?"

Ilya turned them so he could push Shane onto the bed, climbing on after him and pressing Shane into the mattress. Ilya brought his face close to Shane's — his breath was hot on Shane's neck, and goosebumps prickled up his arms.

"I am thinking," Ilya whispered in Shane's ear, "I want to fuck you."

Shane gasped, then whimpered when Ilya pressed his pelvis into Shane's where they were both rigid in their pants.

Ilya pulled back, his beautiful curls falling into Shane's face, his crucifix necklace dangling by his chin. His eyes were searching, uncertain.

"Is that… do you want that?" Ilya asked.

Shane inhaled deeply, his heart was pounding so hard in his chest he could hear it in his ears. Ilya's question left him frazzled, mouth open, unable to speak. He knew the answer, of course he did. He didn't say it, but he'd been thinking about it constantly. It was something Shane

had never done, of course, but he was curious. Curious enough to try using his own finger once or twice, but he got too embarrassed, even alone in the shower, and never really got anywhere. So yes, he did want Ilya to fuck him, but…

“I… Ilya... Yes, I want that.” Shane breathed quietly.

Ilya, Shane realized, had been holding his breath while he waited for Shane’s response. He exhaled then licked his lips, barely containing a smile.

“But, um,” Shane started again. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that… yet.”

He really didn’t want to disappoint Ilya, and he might be willing to try it tonight if Ilya really wanted to. He’d do almost anything to keep Ilya here, on top of him, encompassing Shane in his warmth.

“I’m sorry, um, I hope that’s ok?”

“No no, no sorry. Is okay.” Ilya kissed him lightly. “We do not have to. I… am thinking about it. But never if you do not want to.”

Relief washed over Shane, and he reached up to cradle Ilya’s face in one hand, the scrape of his stubble making Shane’s palm tingle.

“I do want to, really. Maybe… if I get to go to the All-Star Game? We could… there?”

Ilya pressed his lips to Shane’s instead of replying, kissing him with long slow swipes of his tongue, which Shane took to mean Ilya liked that idea. Shane pulled back slightly.

“But, um,” he felt the blush rise on his neck and cheeks as he spoke. “I do want to do… other stuff tonight." He huffed a little laugh, suddenly shy, despite the pressure of Ilya’s hard cock pushing into his hip.

“Yes,” Ilya huffed his own breathy laugh. “Good.”

And then they were kissing again, more deeply now, kisses that were leading somewhere. Ilya was grinding down onto Shane, and the friction was exquisite. The motions of Ilya’s hips, a preview of what Shane would now be looking forward to all month, had Shane gasping and gripping his shoulders to steady himself.

After a while, they weren’t really kissing as much as they were

breathing and groaning slightly into each other's open mouths. Shane's hands were now roaming all over Ilya's body, caressing up and down his sides and back. They eventually landed on his ass, where Shane could feel every flex of muscle as Ilya rubbed against him over and over. Shane spread his legs wide, bending his knees, allowing Ilya to get even closer — a position so close to the real thing, Shane moaned even louder just thinking about it. Then with a gasp, Shane realized that he was dangerously close to coming just from this, just from grinding on each other, fully clothed.

Shane moved his hands to Ilya's hips to slow his movements.

"Ilya… fuck… wait," Shane breathed into his neck. "I'm gonna…" he couldn't finish the sentence, because Ilya interrupted, sticking his pointer and middle finger into Shane's mouth. Shane instinctually began sucking, confused but so turned on by it.

"Shhh… me too…" Ilya grunted. "Cannot stop." He thrust into Shane again and Shane knew there was no going back.

He continued sucking Ilya's fingers, groaning around them. It felt depraved and dirty and Shane *loved* it. Ilya overtook all his senses, his large body enveloping Shane, the taste of his fingers, the smell of his shampoo that was minty and masculine, the sound of his grunts and the tickle of his breaths as he dragged his hips up and down, siding their cocks together.

Shane involuntarily started tilting his hips up to meet Ilya's thrusts — he felt frantic and desperate, like if he didn't come soon he might implode. They both moaned and their movements stuttered. Ilya pulled his fingers from Shane's mouth with a pop so he could sit back a little and grip Shane's waist. The feeling of Ilya's hands gripping him — so tight they might leave bruises — made Shane shudder, and he was gone.

"Fuck, I'm coming, I'm — ahhh…" Shane pumped his hips one more time and then froze, feeling the warmth of his release filling his boxers.

"Shane… so good… so good." Ilya held Shane in place and he too let his orgasm wash over him, his jaw slack and eyes squeezed shut. Then he collapsed onto Shane, pressing his forehead into Shane's shoulder.

They breathed through the aftershocks and then Shane felt Ilya shaking slightly. He turned his head down and saw that Ilya was laughing into his shoulder. What the fuck?

Shane, pleasure still coursing through him, chuckled too, asking, "What's so funny?"

Ilya took a second to stop his giggles and say, "Feel like a kid. Have not done that in many years."

Shane knew he must be beet red, because he had *never* done that, and "many years" ago he was a hockey-obsessed nerd without anyone to grind on.

"I'm sorry," Shane said through his own laughs, "I didn't mean for that to happen. I guess I was… I dunno… I needed that."

"Is okay. Stop saying sorry every second." Ilya kissed him, sweetly now. "Was hot. Have a few more nights on the road too." He winked at Shane, and it made his dick twitch, despite the unreasonably erotic orgasm he just had.

"Can um… can we shower now? I'm feeling a bit… sticky." Shane asked, hating to ruin the moment, but starting to feel truly disgusting with his come now being squished into him by Ilya's heavy body.

"Together?"

"Oh, um, sure." He chewed on his lower lip as Ilya lifted himself off the bed, and Shane followed him to the bathroom, stripping on the way. They began washing each other but started making out, and soon they were jerking each other off in the shower. They collapsed into bed together, the exhaustion of travel and nerves and coming twice in the course of an hour taking hold of Shane.

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That's how it went for the rest of that trip, and the next, and the next. They fell into a pattern of building sexual tension at home, then letting it all out on the road. Shane was becoming addicted to it — blowjobs and showers taking each other in hand, and even some more grinding into each other until they came. Weirdly, he almost liked the aftermath more than anything else, and he found himself hating being in his own bed at home, missing Ilya's steady breathing and arms wrapped around him that lulled him to sleep during road trips.

He wondered if Ilya felt the same way, or if he was totally comfortable and happy with their arrangement. Ilya had been with a lot more people than Shane, and he seemed perfectly capable of doing that without getting emotionally attached, so why would this be any

different? Shane wondered if Ilya was still hooking up with other people while at home in Ottawa. Maybe that's why he didn't want to do anything at home — he had a girl (girls?) here he was seeing between road trips, so he was wrapping his arms around *them*, not even thinking about Shane.

It was better that way, Shane reminded himself. They were friends.

Oh… friends with benefits, that's what this was, wasn't it? Shane had heard that term, and now finally understood it. So Ilya probably had other friends with benefits too. And that was ok. They hadn't made any promises to each other, and it wouldn't be fair for Shane to expect any sort of fidelity from Ilya. But for Shane, he couldn't even fathom hooking up with anyone else now, especially not a girl. Another tick on the "probably gay" column, then.

Shane found himself wishing that he could talk to Delzy about all of this. But beyond keeping the secret that wasn't only his, he could practically hear Delzy telling him that he was being stupid and risking his heart, just like Delzy had. *"It'll only end badly, kid."*

Well fuck that, he didn't care. The bad ending had to be worth it for something that felt *this* good. And they hadn't even fucked yet. He wouldn't let Delzy prevent that from happening, that's for sure.

The parts of Shane's mind that weren't filled with yearning for the feeling of Ilya's hands on his skin were focused on playing excellent hockey and getting to the All-Star Game. When the team got back from their short East Coast trip, Shane was scheduled to do his interview for the promo video they'd show during home games over the next few weeks, and he also learned that they'd be interviewing players and coaches about him too. That made him feel super self-conscious, and he was grateful he'd be back in the dressing room when they showed the video during intermissions.

He'd been sitting on the plane next to Ilya who got a text from Jessica after they landed.

"Hollander, what do I say about you?" Ilya asked with a quirk of his eyebrows as he showed Shane the message on his screen.

"Oh my god, I don't know." Shane shuddered thinking about what Ilya *could* say about him. *"Gives decent head, moans too loud in the shower when I'm jerking him off, and has a weak backhand."* Something like that.

“I can’t believe they’re asking you to do that.” Shane said apologetically.

“Happy to do it.” Ilya bumped him with his shoulder. “Have lots of things to say.”

Shane glared at him, knowing Ilya was thinking exactly the same thing he was.

“I’m sure you do,” Shane sighed.

Delzy walked by them at that moment and he joined the conversation, “You have to give an interview about Hollander too?” He asked Ilya.

Ilya nodded and Shane spoke, “They asked you too? This is so embarrassing.”

“Nah, it’s not, don’t worry about it, it’s part of the gig,” Delzy laughed at Shane and shrugged. “We just have to say shit like you’re an All-Star caliber player, you’re a good role model and teammate, you’re the future of the NHL, that kind of stuff, it’s all basically scripted for us.”

“Don’t sound so excited about it,” Shane rolled his eyes at Delzy’s bored tone.

“Sorry, bud, I’ve done this a million times. Doesn’t mean I don’t mean it.” Delzy ruffled his hair and walked off the plane.

“What’s left to say if he says all that?” Shane looked at Ilya.

Ilya let a smirk pull at his lips and replied, “Will think of something.”

Shane sighed again as he grabbed his backpack and made his way off the plane.

“Just… be professional, okay?” Shane called back to Ilya who was walking a few paces behind him.

“Always most professional, Hollander.” Ilya called up to him with a slight chuckle on his lips.

***

Whatever Ilya and Delzy said, it worked. Shane won the fan vote by a landslide, with almost 100,000 more votes than the 2nd place player. But he opted not to watch the video, not sure if he could handle watching his kind-of-mentor and his… whatever Ilya was to him…

saying nice things about him.

Shane was elated, feeling almost like winning the fan vote was better than being selected by the team. Hundreds of thousands of people had gone online to click his picture to say, yes, Shane Hollander *is* an All-Star level NHL player. He knew the Ottawa fans loved him, but to have this concrete number of exactly how many people thought he deserved this honor — it was almost intoxicating.

And that's how he found himself packing a bag for LA with butterflies in his stomach on a Thursday evening in February, about to be an NHL All-Star in his rookie year.

His mom was beyond thrilled, his dad extremely proud in his quiet way, and they said they'd try to come out for the game, but in the end, they couldn't make a trip to California work with their schedules. Shane said he wished they could be there, but in all honesty, he was glad they wouldn't, with the plans he had for himself and Ilya. There was something about getting fucked for the first time in a hotel where his parents were also staying that made Shane really uncomfortable. Plus, they saw him play all the time.

While Shane was packing, Hayden burst into his room and flopped onto his bed, disrupting the neatly folded clothes there, and Shane sighed heavily. Hayden didn't notice.

"Hey bud, excited for LA?" Hayden asked, kicking his legs off the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, actually." Shane replied honestly. "I'm like, crazy nervous. But it's going to be so cool. There's going to be so many guys there who I've like, idolized, for years, you know? It's sort of surreal to think I'll be playing *with* some of them. Like a room full of Delzys."

Hayden laughed, "Yeah, well, lucky you."

"Sorry you're not coming too," Shane offered, sincerely.

"Ah, it's okay. I knew I wasn't going to be an All-Star this year. Maybe someday though! And anyway, um, that's why I came in here."

"Why?" Shane asked, as he refolded one of the shirts Hayden had disrupted and put it in his suitcase.

"So you know that girl I met at that club last week? Jackie?" Hayden asked.

“Um, yeah? I think so?” He vaguely remembered Hayden telling him about a really hot girl he went home with one night recently, but that was common enough that Shane hadn’t paid much attention.

“So we’ve been, like, texting and stuff…” Hayden trailed off. That *was* new, usually Hayden moved on from his hookups pretty quickly.

“Oh cool, so you like her?”

“Dude, I like her *so much,*” Hayden gushed. “She’s like super hot, obviously, but she’s also really nice and like, funny, and just so cool? I dunno, bud, I haven’t felt like this about a girl before, like I want to be with her all the time and impress her and whatever.”

“That’s awesome, Hayd!” Shane loved seeing his friend like this. He could relate, even though he’d never tell Hayden. “So you’re gonna hang out with her while I’m gone?”

“So that’s the thing, I was kinda hoping you’d be cool with it if I invited her over for the weekend, since I’ll have the place to myself. I want to like, cook dinner for her or something, all romantic and shit, you know?”

“Oh…” Shane was always uncertain about letting people into his personal space, even friends. So the thought of a stranger there while he was away put him on edge. But Hayden knew Shane well enough and was prepared to make his case.

“I *promise* we won’t touch any of your stuff or eat your food or anything. For real, we will keep to my stuff only. Pleaseeee?”

Hayden sounded so desperate, he sounded like a little kid getting his parents to have a sleepover with a friend. And he was making big puppy dog eyes at Shane, so Shane had to give in,. “Sure, man, of course she can come over. I don’t know why she would *want to*…”

Shane laughed as Hayden threw a pair of sweatpants at him. “Shut up! She really likes me too, I think!”

“Well, then I hope you have a good time.” Shane smiled at him. “But not too good! Don’t do like… stuff… on the couch okay? That’s a shared space.”

Hayden popped off the bed and stood stiffly and made a mock salute. “Yes sir! No couch sex!”

“And try not to burn the place down cooking, ok? Maybe get your sister on skype to guide you through it.”

Hayden walked out of the room with his middle finger flipped up behind him, but a big smile on his face. Shane kind of wished he could share the moment with Hayden, tell him how excited he was for *his* potentially romantic night — share his own love life, such as it was, with his friend who could so freely and openly talk about the girl he was inviting over. Shane’s heart sank a little at the thought.

But his spirits picked back up when he opened his bedside table and grabbed the small bottle of lube, packet of condoms, and personal hygiene items he’d ordered online a couple of weeks ago — far too embarrassed to even attempt buying them in a store. Out of an abundance of caution, and ok, *fear* that Hayden would intercept his delivery, Shane had gone through the trouble of setting up a PO box just for this purpose. He was sure it would be useful to have at some point, right? So why not?

Only *now*, while he was packing, did he think that Ilya probably already had lube and condoms in his suitcase all the time. But it was good to have on hand, he supposed. With a flutter of anticipation and a bit of swelling of his dick, Shane wrapped it all up in another pair of sweatpants and stuffed the bundle into his suitcase, where it would hopefully go unnoticed.

Before ordering anything, he’d waited until he knew Hayden would be out of the apartment for a while, and did some internet research to figure out exactly what he needed and how to prepare. He knew it was a whole thing, preparing, but wasn’t exactly sure all it entailed. He blushed his way through some very useful articles, and even attempted watching some videos, but that was a bridge too far, and he slapped his laptop closed after about 10 seconds. He then promptly opened it back up to order all the supplies he needed and quickly cleared his browser history — then checked to make sure it was totally clear a few more times.

He and Ilya hadn’t talked about fucking since that first time Ilya mentioned it, but Shane kept replaying Ilya’s gruff, throaty whispered “I want to fuck you” over and over in his head, and he was sure Ilya would still want to. He felt mostly ready, overwhelmingly nervous, and so so so horny. It was crazy how much he was thinking about sex — he had never in his life been this keyed up all the time. He hoped that going *all the way* would help him chill out about it all, but he feared he may never ever be chill about Ilya Rozanov.

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The private chartered flight from Ottawa to LA felt like such a luxury for only 3 people, but Shane loved it. He really *felt* like an All-Star, not just some kid from Ottawa living some fantasy life, which was how he felt pretty consistently through his first NHL season so far. He tried to bask in that good feeling and avoid the awkwardness of being on an 8-hour flight alone with Ilya and Delzy and a very accommodating flight crew.

Delzy had an infuriatingly smug look on his face looking across the small table at Shane and Ilya sitting next to each other.

“So… babies’ first All-Star game. How are you guys feeling?”

Ilya rolled his eyes, “Is no big deal.”

Shane on the other hand, breathed out a big sigh and said, “I’m so fucking nervous.”

Delzy laughed, “I don’t get how you two are such good friends…” He gave Shane a knowing look, and Shane kicked him under the table.

“Roz, I noticed that you weren’t going out as much the last couple of road trips. Are you giving up your party lifestyle already?”

Oh god, Delzy was going there. Shane’s stomach lurched and he glared as subtly as he could.

“Have been tired. Still a lot more fun than you, old man.” Ilya said coolly. Shane didn’t get how he was so nonchalant all the time — he was jealous, because right now he was sure his face was the color of a fire truck.

“I’m sure you do,” Delzy grinned like the cat who got the canary. At the same time a ding indicated that they could get up from their seats, and Shane almost leapt up with relief.

“I’m uh… gotta go!” He said too loudly for the small plane, and walked quickly to the tiny bathroom. As soon as he got in there, though, he began thinking about what Delzy and Ilya might be saying to each other, so he did his business and quickly left.

But Ilya had moved to the coach farther down the small plane, headphones and eye mask on, and Delzy was pulling out his portable dvd player.

“Hey, jumpy,” Delzy chuckled. “Wanna watch a movie, or are you going to go cuddle Rozanov?”

“Would you stop??” Shane pleaded in a whisper. “There’s nothing going on between us. And besides, you’re being kinda homophobic, Delzy. Can’t two guys cuddle as friends?” He countered, feeling triumphant about actually having a comeback.

“Oh shut the fuck up,” Delzy laughed and Shane felt the knot in his stomach loosen. He sat down in the seat next to his captain.

“So what are we watching?”

They watched some action movie while Ilya slept — whenever a new actor came into frame, Delzy asked Shane if he thought he was hot, and without fail, Shane turned pink and refused to answer every single time. Delzy found this, and Shane’s grumbling complaints, hilarious. He couldn’t very well say, “sure he’s nice to look at, but he doesn’t compare to the guy half-snoring a few seats back”, without Delzy making a big deal out of it.

Ilya woke up in time for them to have a surprisingly delicious lunch, and Delzy told them stories from past All-Stars Games, answering Shane’s many questions. Even Ilya seemed interested in the antics Delzy shared, letting his too-cool mask drop a bit as the hours passed. Eventually Delzy fell asleep in the middle of another movie, with about 2 more hours to go on the flight.

Shane peeked over at Ilya, who had his headphones back on, but he was awake. They made eye contact, and Shane shot him a questioning look. Ilya’s eyes twinkled with mischief and he shifted to make room next to him on the couch, a silent invitation. Shane looked back at Delzy, who was totally out, and smiled shyly back at Ilya while walking down the short aisle to join him. They didn’t speak, Shane just pulled out his book and read while Ilya continued listening to his iPod.

The next thing he knew he was being woken up by Ilya nudging Shane’s leg with his knee. He jolted upright, realizing that he’d fallen asleep on Ilya’s shoulder *again*. It’s like there was a damn magnet inside Shane that was subconsciously being drawn toward Ilya and Shane had no way to resist it. Delzy quirked an eyebrow at Shane behind Ilya’s back as he walked off the plane, and Shane glared at him.

They’d already played in LA and San Jose this season, so Shane was

less overwhelmed by the California of it all this time, but it was still overwhelming to be in a city that sprawled so far, with so many people everywhere he looked. When they started seeing billboards for the All-Star Weekend on the way to the hotel, Shane pointed them out to Ilya, who looked as awed as Shane felt.

Ilya, who was normally so unfazed, was grinning ear to ear, triumphant. Shane suspected this meant a lot more to Ilya than he was letting on, and Shane swelled with pride — for him, and for them. This was real, they were NHL All-Stars. They made it. Together.

Chapter End Notes

> This is kind of a short chapter, and I'm still working on our Ilya interlude for this one. But I couldn't stop reworking and editing this chapter, and needed to cut myself off, so here you go - I hope you like it!

Chapter 12: Ilya Interlude #6

Chapter Summary

> Instead of my usual Ilya Interlude, I present you the transcript of the promo video interview with Ilya that Shane never watched.

Chapter Notes

> I was derelict in my duties in the last chapter and forgot to thank my loveliest lovely betas who talked me off the ledge about that chapter, Nico and Paupy.
>
> AND thank you to dntat for the P.O. box idea in the last chapter!

Transcript of Ottawa Centaurs Video - Vote Hollander All-Star Game 2011

Ilya Rozanov: When I came from Russia to Canada, first person from the team to greet me was Shane Hollander.

Cut to video clips of Shane and Ilya competing at their last World Juniors Championship game, Shane being presented with the gold medal, Ilya with silver.

Ilya Rozanov: He beat me in World Juniors, was hard to think of playing on a team with him, you want to hate that guy, right? But Hollander, right away he said was good to see me, he is excited to play with me. So. (Ilya shrugs) We become friends. What else to do?

Clips of Shane and Ilya assisting each other on goals, celebrating during games, talking and laughing on the bench.

Ilya Rozanov: He learned how to say hello to me in Russian for first day at training camp. Hollander is nicest Canadian boy.

Footage of Shane making some brutal steals, close-up of him laughing as he rips the puck off an opponent's stick.

Ilya Rozanov: Nobody as serious about hockey as Hollander, he will practice practice practice later than everyone else, even though he is already better than everyone. Except me of course. (Ilya winks).

Behind the scenes footage of Shane practicing on the ice, shooting at an empty net with no one else around.

Ilya Rozanov: Our friendship, it is very important to me. So would mean a lot to have Hollander with me for All-Star Game our rookie year. Plus, you want good hockey? No better hockey than Rozanov and Hollander together.

Interviewer (offscreen): They actually changed the format of the game this year. There will be two teams, but it's not East vs. West. There will be a draft for each team. So what would it be like if you ended up playing against each other again?

Ilya Rozanov: Even better. Rematch. Only thing better than playing with Hollander is beating him. I will not go easy on him, Hollander knows I play hard, always.

Cutaway to a clip of Ilya and Shane facing off at their last World Juniors game.

Voiceover of Ilya Rozanov: Vote Hollander for All-Star Game 2011

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Hey now, you're an All-Star

Chapter Notes

The problem with planning is that sometimes the chapter takes over and makes itself into something else. That's what happened here, so I hope you like it!

My eternal gratitude to Nico, Paupy, and dntat for helping make this all make sense and for all your google doc screaming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The start of All-Star Weekend was a whirlwind, and Shane hardly had any time to think. He was completely overwhelmed with the media, the schedule of events, the way every single one of the biggest stars in the NHL were all gathered together like it was no big deal. At only 19, he was literally achieving one of his life-long dreams. He should be happy. And he *was* happy. But he also felt kind of alone.

When they arrived, Delzy went off to reconnect with a group of former Centaurs players, and Ilya was going to a lunch organized by the Russian national team for all their players at the All-Star game, which left Shane on his own until the official welcome party that night. The next day, they would have a fan meet and greet and a Q&A press conference in the morning, and the All-Star game draft in the afternoon, then they'd have dinner with the teams they were drafted to. And finally on Sunday, they'd play the actual game. But right now, he was at a loss.

Shane decided to hit the hotel gym and take a nap — the jet lag was catching up to him. He spent his time on the treadmill daydreaming about Ilya, thinking about going to the hotel pool during their break the next day, then thinking about the last time he saw Ilya at a hotel pool. Shane tried to stifle the giant smile threatening to take over his face when he remembered the way Ilya had kissed him that day, wet hair dripping all over him, pushing him up against the cold tile wall. A pool visit at this hotel would probably be a lot more crowded, but Shane would be happy just to hang out together, enjoying the California sunshine.

After the gym, he headed to his room for a nap. He didn't want to totally fuck up his sleep schedule, but he was exhausted. He stripped down to his underwear before cozying up under the covers of one of the beds — he fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

What felt like a split second later, Shane's alarm was going off. He groaned but didn't open his eyes and reached out to smack the alarm clock. But his hand didn't hit the clock, it landed on a warm lump that confused Shane's fuzzy post-nap brain. He creaked his eyes open and the confusion morphed into fondness when he realized who it was. Ilya had apparently gotten back from lunch, and he was lying on Shane's bed, fully clothed and on top of the covers, also groggily opening his eyes.

"Stop the sound," Ilya groaned.

"You're between me and the alarm clock," Shane rolled his eyes, as much as he could when they were only half open.

"You do not have arms or legs?" Ilya croaked, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Oh fuck you, can't you just turn over and turn it off?" But Shane was propping himself up on an arm as he spoke, and he reached his other arm over Ilya's bulk to smack the alarm clock behind Ilya's back. Once the blaring alarm was stopped, Shane realized that he had basically draped himself over Ilya in the process. He slowly pulled his arm back, looking down at Ilya, whose eyes were now open and turned up towards Shane.

Ilya interrupted Shane's downward trajectory by squeezing an arm around his back, so their chests were pressed together and Shane was partially on top of Ilya.

"Oh!" Shane exhaled in surprise.

"Sorry," Ilya laughed quietly.

"No you're not," Shane grinned.

Their faces were an inch apart, and it took all of Shane's willpower to not close the gap and kiss Ilya. But they shouldn't, they had to get ready for the party, there wasn't time to make out or even quickly jerk each other off in the shower.

"I need to shower," Shane insisted.

“I like to shower…” Ilya said casually, but his eyes sparkled with mischief.

“We don’t have time for uh, long showers.”

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Fine. Later?”

Shane pulled away reluctantly, and he was buzzing from finally waking up with Ilya next to him again, he said, “Maybe, if you’re lucky.”

Ilya barked out a laugh. “What happened to good boy Shane? So snarky now!”

Proud of himself for managing to not immediately fold to Ilya’s proposition, he upped the ante.

Walking backwards towards the bathroom, he said, “What about this? Let’s wait until the draft tomorrow. If we’re drafted to different teams, we don’t do anything before the game Sunday. We’ll be opponents, that would be wrong.” He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips in a smug expression — proud of himself for showing restraint for once.

“Is not already wrong as teammates?” Ilya asked, now stalking across the room to Shane with a crooked smirk.

But Shane’s stomach lurched. The stark reminder that they *were* doing something wrong every time they hooked up knocked him back to the harsh reality of their situation. And in the back of Shane’s mind, a mean voice was reminding him that for Ilya, he was just something fun — maybe something rebellious. Not anything special, just a thrilling tryst.

“Yeah,” Shane sighed. “I guess so.”

He evaded Ilya’s touch again and said, “I’ll be quick in the shower.”

There was a flash of something Shane couldn’t decipher in Ilya’s expression, but in an instant he was back to his usual cool smile.

“Yes, good.” Ilya nodded.

Shane pulled himself together in the shower, reminding himself why he was here: to play hockey and prove himself as an All-Star. He emerged from the bathroom with a smile, maybe a little too big, too fake, but he was going to fake it as long as he had to. And by the time

they went down to the welcome party, Shane and Ilya were back on even footing.

It was loud and filled with NHL players, plus lots of important hockey media people, minor celebrities and even some athletes from other professional leagues — Shane was pretty sure he saw some lesser-known NBA players towering over most of the crowd. This was even more overwhelming than his draft day.

“Look, Benny Marks — why is he here? He is so old, older than Delzy, and he is ancient.”

Shane laughed and said, “His name is on the cup 3 times!”

“Yes, 10 years ago,” Ilya snarked. “Seattle had to send someone I guess.”

They sat at a table in the back, unable to legally drink, but each of them had a beer passed to them by some generous older players who probably thought it would be funny to get the rookies drunk. Ilya had a running commentary going about every guy in there, chirping their playing style, their clothes, whatever he could think of to make Shane laugh. It helped ease Shane’s nerves and kept him occupied so he could avoid the awkward mingling and socializing that made him so uncomfortable.

“Oh there is Scott Hunter, most boring guy in the NHL.” Ilya pointed across the room to the huge blond forward for New York. Shane actually really respected and admired Hunter — he was an amazing player and, other than Ilya, no one had a bad word to say about him.

“That’s not fair,” Shane huffed a laugh. “Hunter’s so good and seems like he does a lot of charity work and stuff like that. I bet he’ll be MVP in the next couple of years.”

Ilya scoffed, “This is all you know about him, he does charity? Boring, Hollander.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Please. Hunter is jealous of me.”

At that moment, Delzy walked up to the two of them with fresh beers.

“Last round, okay boys? Don’t need you making fools of yourselves before the weekend really even starts.”

Ilya rolled his eyes.

“You talking about Hunter?” Delzy asked, gesturing across the room.

“Yeah,” Shane nodded, sipping his beer and feeling a little tipsy already. “Ilya says he’s boring, I think he’s just jealous.”

“What is to be jealous of? I have already more goals than him this season,” Ilya bragged.

“So do I,” Shane reminded him. “But the Admirals still have a better record.”

“All right, enough of this petty bullshit. Hunter’s great, you guys are great, this is the fucking All-Star game, everyone is great.” Delzy settled into a chair next to Shane, and Shane noticed his eyes lingering on Hunter and had to suppress a laugh.

“I saw he was on some list of hottest NHL players…” Shane directed his comment to Delzy, who glared at him, silently mouthing “don’t” while Ilya was looking towards Hunter.

Ilya turned, an unimpressed look on his face, saying, “I’m hotter than him too.”

It was Delzy’s turn to have to stifle a laugh at the furiously pink blush that rose on Shane’s cheeks. Shane took another big swig of his beer, hiding behind the bottle as much as he could.

Shane swallowed thickly and said, “Enough about Hunter.”

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, and they went to bed at 10 because they had to be up early. Shane was regretting his “let’s not hook up until we find out the draft results” plan as he watched Ilya get undressed before bed.

His restraint failing, Shane got into bed and said, “Um… you could still sleep here, if you wanted to?” He gestured to the spot next to him.

Ilya’s eyebrows shot up. “I thought we had to wait for draft?” He asked, a note of annoyance in his voice.

“I mean, we could just, like, sleep?” Shane was embarrassing himself, but now he felt desperate just to have Ilya close to him again.

“Fine,” Ilya said with a sigh and roll of his eyes. “But when you wake

up hard, is not my fault, and I will not do anything about it."

Oof, hitting Shane where it hurt.

"I don't care about that," Shane replied, turning on his side away from Ilya to hide the way his dick was starting to swell.

"Okay."

Ilya turned off the light and Shane felt the bed dip as he lay down next to him. Shane hated the way his body relaxed simply because Ilya was in the bed with him. They weren't even touching! But the heat of Ilya's body and steady sound of his breathing alone were enough to help Shane calm his nerves and settle into the sheets more, sleep creeping in and taking hold within minutes.

***

Shane woke up with his face pressed to Ilya's back. Light was streaming into the room between the curtains, and Shane marveled at the February California sunshine. He also marveled at how hard his dick was first thing in the morning. He shifted away from Ilya and took some deep breaths in an attempt to get rid of his inevitable yet still embarrassing boner.

Ilya turned to Shane, smiling lazily while he stretched. His eyes scanned Shane's body and narrowed when they reached the protruding bulge in his shorts.

"Good morning," he drawled.

"Shut up."

Shane rolled his eyes then rolled out of the bed. When he turned back, he saw Ilya palming his own erection and held back a groan.

"Fuck, why are you doing this?" Shane whined.

"Because," Ilya grasped himself tightly. "You insist on waiting til draft, does not mean I am not horny."

"Well, go jerk off in the shower," Shane gestured towards the bathroom.

"You are sure?" Ilya purred in a way that made Shane's skin tingle. His defenses were weakening by the second and he pressed a hand to his own cock to relieve some of the need.

“Or you could…” Shane began, “do it out here.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “You will watch?”

Shane nodded, breathless with the overwhelming need to see Ilya get himself off.

“Maybe… I will too?” Shane tossed it out there to see how Ilya would react.

“Yes,” was his only reply, in a low, dark voice that sent another tingle through Shane.

Standing there in front of the bed, Shane pulled down his shorts, while Ilya did the same from his position leaning back against the headboard. Shane started lightly stroking himself, Ilya simply held his cock and held Shane’s eye contact.

“Good,” Ilya hummed, then started moving his hand up and down his shaft.

And in an instant, Shane was on the edge. If Ilya’s heavy breathing was any indication, he was too. They both stroked furiously, moving fast and grunting out small noises of pleasure.

“I’m gonna –” Shane started.

“Me too,” Ilya interrupted, and then spilled all over his stomach with a shudder. That pushed Shane to the breaking point and he squeezed his eyes shut, holding the image of Ilya coming in his mind, and pulsed into his own hand.

He was panting hard when he opened his eyes, and Ilya had an obnoxiously sexy smirk on his face.

“Don’t look so satisfied,” Shane said, then walked to the bathroom to shower.

“Will be more satisfied after the game tomorrow, I think,” Ilya called after him. Shane’s stomach lurched, and he had to take a cold shower to keep himself in check.

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The All-Star draft was fun, but very long, and Shane was completely exhausted by the time it was over. He had been hopeful that he would get picked pretty early, maybe the 3rd round, figuring the team

captains would pick their friends and players with more years of experience. So he was dumbfounded to hear his name called *first*.

He felt like an actor at one of those awards shows who didn't expect to win, knowing the cameras were all pointed directly at his shocked face that slowly became an overjoyed grin. In his mind, he could hear his mom screaming at the TV with excitement, hear his dad's booming applause, and he beamed with pride. When Ilya's name was called second, he grinned impossibly wider.

Playing hockey without Ilya or Delzy or any of his Centaurs teammates for the first time since last summer was strange, and Shane had to adjust to different styles of play. But he loved the challenge, and he was ready to prove to his captains that they made the right choice in picking him first. They only had Sunday morning and a little of the afternoon to practice, and even though the stakes were low and most of the guys weren't going to give it 100%, Shane was struggling not to push himself — it's just how he always played.

"Hey, Hollander, save some of that energy for the game!" Called out Benny Marks, the Seattle forward Ilya had called old at the welcome party. Shane didn't think his age showed at all, honestly, he was still a powerful skater with sharp accuracy, and he would definitely be in the hall of fame one day.

"Sorry!" Shane yelled back. "I'm not used to not trying so hard."

Marks laughed and skated over to Shane, saying, "Don't risk an injury just to prove yourself to us now. Bring it to the game tonight, okay?"

"Right, sure," Shane replied, still feeling a bit starstruck.

"How're you going to do, playing against your buddy Rozanov? You guys are like inseparable, right? Don't go soft just because he's your best friend or whatever," Marks said as they drifted back to the tunnel into the dressing room.

Shane internally flinched at the accusation that he might do anything to give Ilya an advantage.

"No way, of course not, I'm here to win. Everyone has friends on other teams, right?"

"Yeah, but the way they talk about you guys, you'd think you were sucking each others' dicks in the showers after practice — like you're fucking in love or some shit."

Shane sputtered and coughed, sure he was turning beet red.

“Huh? I mean… what? Ha… um nope, we’re not… you know… we’re friends—”

Marks cut him off with a slap to his back, “Whoa, sorry kid, just joking around. No need to get all offended, you’re good, I don’t *actually* think you’re sucking Rozanov’s dick. Gross.”

Marks laughed as he said it, like it was the funniest and most preposterous thing imaginable. Shane took a swig from his water bottle, trying to regain his ability to speak.

“Oh, right, yeah, funny!”

He tried (and probably failed) to sound like he really thought it was funny. But internally, he was panicking. Did people really think that? No, right? There was no way. The media did make a big deal out of him and Ilya being friends, they got asked about it a lot and reporters often wanted to interview them together, but lots of teammates were friends. He thought back to Delzy and his “friend” Fitzy. Shane remembered being a kid and watching them on the ice, imagining himself and his future best friend playing on the same team, everyone loving them. Had the media insinuated more about them too? Or was this all just homophobic bullshit from Marks?

Shane didn’t know. His mind was reeling. The second reminder in as many days that Shane was taking a gigantic risk and — let’s face it — making a huge mistake, every time he and Ilya hooked up landed hard in Shane’s chest, and he began to question everything.

What the fuck was he doing? Why was he putting his career at risk… just to sexually experiment with his teammate? He felt so stupid, but powerless to stop. The reality was that he was more than just experimenting with Ilya, they had long passed that threshold. He was maybe falling in love with him. And that was the absolute stupidest thing he could do.

Shane shoved all of those thoughts into a locked compartment in his brain, making room for what he needed to do. He couldn’t be worrying about being in love or vaguely homophobic teammates when he was about to be on a giant international stage for the scrutiny of every hockey fan and journalist in North America. This was why he never should have gotten close to Ilya in the first place. So today, he was going to play as hard as he could against Ilya, so well that no one would even fathom accusing him of giving his friend an advantage,

and he could prove his worth to the hockey world.

When Shane made it out to the ice for the national anthems, he was completely focused on hockey, until he spotted Ilya across the ice, lined up along the other blue line, facing Shane's team. Some pop star Shane had never heard of was belting O Canada, and he was watching Ilya mouthing the words. He hadn't realized that Ilya had learned it, and Shane couldn't help but smile, a strange sense of pride that this person he cared for so much was singing the anthem of Shane's country.

Ilya caught his eye and winked, and it was like he took a hatchet to the compartment in Shane's mind where he was keeping all his feelings. Shane stuck his tongue out at Ilya, who grinned, and Shane prayed that it wasn't caught on camera. Fuck. Get your shit together, Hollander. He turned his eyes back up to the flag as another singer stepped up for the US anthem.

"All right boys, let's do this!" Yelled Shawn Stratton, the co-captain of his team, when they gathered back at the bench before the face-off. "Hollander, you're taking the face-off against Rozanov!"

"What?" Shane's eyes bugged out of his head.

"Yeah, the league is eating it up, best friends and teammates facing off against each other, it's a whole thing. The fans want to see you guys as rivals or some shit. So get over there!"

However nervous Shane had been 10 seconds ago, it tripled, no — quadrupled. *He* was taking the first face off of his first All-Star game? His mom would definitely be losing her mind with pride, and that was enough to bolster his confidence.

He saw Ilya making his way to center ice, barely holding back a grin. He was *loving* this, and that set off butterflies in Shane's stomach. It brought him right back to their World Juniors final just over a year ago, before any of this happened, when they were basically strangers, and Shane had a singular goal: win gold and get drafted first overall. All that had happened, so Shane had no reason to doubt that he would win again tonight.

"Feels familiar, eh?" Shane asked as he bent down in front of Ilya.

"Yes, but this time I win, Hollander," Ilya practically purred back.

"We'll see about that." Shane channeled Ilya and mustered his

smuggest smile.

Ilya slid an inch closer so only Shane could hear him and whispered, “What do I get if I win?”

Shane gulped, bit his lip, then said potentially the most dangerous words he’d ever uttered: “Whatever you want.”

Ilya’s eyes flared and Shane’s face heated.

“Ready boys?” The ref said as he skated over with the puck.

They both nodded, waiting for the puck drop.

Ilya winked.

And Shane lost the face-off.

Despite losing the first face off, which Shane knew would be a headline in and of itself, Shane’s team was winning by the middle of the 2nd period. He had a goal and an assist and was feeling good. Ilya definitely had the inferior team, despite having Scott Hunter and Delzy too — something just wasn’t gelling with them, and he could see Ilya getting increasingly frustrated.

He wanted to say something to make him feel better, but at the same time, he did want to win. And he couldn’t let his team think he was aiding the opposing team. So during a break in play when the puck went over the boards, Shane sidled up to Ilya and elbowed him.

“Hey,” Shane said lightly.

“I do not like you right now,” Ilya grumbled.

“Does that mean you usually *do* like me?” Shane made the most innocent face he could, doing everything short of sticking out his bottom lip and batting his eyelashes.

“Shut up, Hollander,” he replied, but Ilya was fighting a smile. “I do not like you ever. Go away.”

Shane began to skate backwards, but called out, “Liar!” and Ilya rolled his eyes and shook his head with a resigned laugh.

There. Maybe he’d be less grumpy now.

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With three minutes left in the third period, it was tied at 6-6. All-Star games usually had higher scores because of a general agreement to be less defensive in the interest of preventing injury and making it more fun for the fans. And Ilya's team seemed to have figured themselves out, because they caught up after the final intermission.

Shane and Ilya were facing off again, and Ilya wasn't playing around this time. Shane could see him gritting his teeth, his face could only be described as menacing. Shane shuddered — he was glad he had this guy on his team the rest of the year.

They tussled over the puck, and it wound up sliding towards the right winger on Ilya's team, who passed it back to Ilya and then he took off towards Shane's team's zone. He was flying down the ice, the fastest Shane had ever seen him. In the back of his mind, Shane hoped Ilya was playing so hard because of whatever he wanted if he won. And his heart raced a little faster at the thought, wondering what Ilya had in mind.

Fuck all his worries and what Marks said and being safe or cautious — he needed to touch Ilya as soon as possible. He needed this game to end. He couldn't let them go to overtime. But he still wanted to win, damn it. So Shane chased Ilya down the ice, catching up and interrupting his breakaway. Shane shoved him lightly, but with enough strength to knock him off course.

The crowd was deafening. They were absolutely eating up the "friends turned rivals" narrative unfolding before their eyes — on top of the existing "two generational-talent rookies" narrative. Shane and Ilya were hockey gold. It was a lot of pressure, but it also felt so fucking good. Shane felt, in this one moment, like he was living up to the hype.

They ended up against the boards again, fighting for the puck, and it seemed like their teammates were going to let them battle it out — no one was coming to help.

"I'm finishing this game, Rozanov," Shane bit out as he maneuvered his stick and skates, trying to gain control of the puck.

"Ha!" Ilya laughed and elbowed Shane, "Rozanov, is it?"

"Yeah, you're not my teammate tonight," Shane grunted.

"I will be much more than teammate tonight, Hollander," Ilya rumbled and fucking *winked again*.

The millisecond of distraction was enough for Shane to lose the puck to Ilya. He shot it across the ice to a waiting teammate, who slap-shotted it into the net. Shane hung his head in defeat, and Ilya slid up behind him.

“Do not be sad, Hollander,” he teased.

“Oh, fuck you,” Shane said back with no real bite.

“No, you,” Ilya leaned in to whisper, and Shane’s breath hitched before he narrowed his eyes and pinched his lips together.

Ilya skated back towards his bench with a big shrug and another wink, and Shane knew the cameras were probably zoomed in on that wink and fans would be sharing clips of it all over the internet. Only Shane knew the real reason Ilya was looking so smug, and it made his blood run hot.

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Ilya’s team won. Of course they did. So now, at the after party, Shane was hearing all about it even though he’d been there: how Ilya had bested him, how he ranked second, how wrong Marks and Stratton had been to draft Shane first. It was “all in good fun,” but Shane was letting it get under his skin. Ilya stopped participating in the onslaught of chirping after only a few minutes, likely seeing the frustration building behind Shane’s smiling exterior.

It’s not that he couldn’t take a joke, that was part of being a hockey player and Shane had learned at a young age to let it roll off his back and to throw it right back. But some of these guys didn’t chirp with a smile or a friendly wink, it was more like a bite of satisfaction. Shane was brought back to that very first day of development camp back in the summer — the side-eyes, almost sneers, and whispered jokes that all let him know they didn’t think he deserved the attention or praise heaped on him by the media and fans. He just didn’t think that would have followed him here, where everyone was one of the best.

Was it that Shane was *so good* that he was worthy of their ire? Then why didn’t they treat Ilya the same? Shane had enough awareness of the world around him, and he had been in hockey locker rooms his whole life. He knew it was something else — maybe everything else — about him: he was short, younger even than Ilya, boyish and half-Japanese, which meant he wasn’t masculine enough. He was polite, like Ilya always said, a “good boy.”

As Shane sat, head-ducked into his ginger ale at the bar, a friendly voice behind him said, “Hey Hollander, tough loss tonight.”

Scott Hunter sat down next to him, shooting Shane his mega-watt smile.

“Yeah, well, you know. All-Star game doesn’t really count, does it?” Shane shot back, trying to bolster his own mood.

“You’re not wrong,” Hunter laughed. “Looks like your buddy is enjoying the win.”

Hunter gestured across the horseshoe bar to Ilya, who was being handed a shot by his captain.

“Why aren’t you over there celebrating with them?” Shane asked.

“I’m not really one for shots, especially after a win that doesn’t count,” Hunter chuckled and Shane smiled. He was being friendly enough, and that was refreshing. “Plus, I wanted to say hello, introduce myself properly. We’ve played each other, obviously, but I haven’t had a conversation with this year’s first overall draft pick yet.”

Hunter sounded sincere, so Shane replied in kind.

“Oh, um, thanks,” he laughed, not really knowing what to say. “I appreciate it.”

“It’s a tough league, you know?” Hunter asked, eyes focused on his hands. “Don’t want bad blood across the league — you never know where you’ll end up. So.”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, we want to beat New York more, and we’re going to,” Shane replied, pointing at Hunter with a laugh on his lips. “But yeah, it’s nothing personal against you.”

“Yo, Hunter! Get over here! Team photo!” Someone yelled very drunkenly from the other side of the bar.

“Guess I better go,” Hunter rolled his eyes. “See you around, Hollander. Chin up!”

Shane faked a smile and said goodbye, watching Hunter join the group with Ilya smiling for a group photo.

He heaved a sigh. He was ready for this to be over. He was ready to be up in the hotel room, alone with Ilya, with one of the only people in

the world who never made him feel scrutinized and picked apart. He wanted to forget these bitter, cocky assholes and be with the only other person who truly knew what it was like to be at the top, at a place where no one else could reach them..

Deciding he had shown his face at the party long enough, Shane got up and looked towards the winning team breaking apart after their group photo. He caught Ilya's eye, tipping his head towards the elevators, hoping that Ilya would follow. Ilya winked again, and Shane turned away with a secret smile.

Up in the room, Shaned undressed and got in the shower. He had pulled out the hygiene products he'd ordered online and quickly used it. He'd practiced once at home, just to be sure he knew what he was doing. He dressed, changing into a soft old t-shirt and sweats — the sweats he'd rolled around the lube and condoms he'd packed, so he placed those in the nightstand drawer. Right next to the bible. Shane laughed to himself.

As he settled onto the bed they'd slept in the night before, about to turn on the tv and wondering where Ilya was, he heard the lock click and the door creak open. Shane's heartbeat skipped and sped up. This was it. Shane inadvertently held his breath, waiting for Ilya to enter the room.

Ilya was loosening his tie as he turned the corner of the narrow hallway leading back from the door. The movement was so domestic yet so erotic — it was familiar to Shane now, but the thrill that coursed through him felt new every time. Ilya's eyes caught on Shane sitting back against the headboard as he pulled the tie out of his collar with a snap. Shane tried not to gasp.

While Ilya toed off his shoes and took off his jacket, Shane swallowed hard then said, "You won."

A grin unfurled like a flower blossoming across Ilya's face, broad and beautiful.

"I did." He took a few steps towards the bed.

Shane shifted under his gaze and asked, "Well, what do you get if you win?"

"Whatever I want," Ilya breathed as he climbed over Shane, who slid himself down the headboard, allowing Ilya to hover over him before claiming his mouth in a bruising kiss.

They tumbled together, hungry and desperate, breaking only to pull their shirts off and making a mess of the bedding. Shane pulled back to take a breath, now straddling Ilya and bracing himself with hands on his shoulders.

“This is what you wanted?” Shane asked, breathless. “Making out?” He knew it wasn’t, and maybe he was over-eager, maybe he was needy, but he was desperate to know what was on Ilya’s mind.

“This is not good for you?” Ilya raised his eyebrows in mock dismay.

“Stop, you know it is,” Shane ducked his head, trying to hide the way his cheeks were burning.

“Yes, I know,” Ilya smirked with a glance between Shane’s legs. He licked his lips, considering, then flipped them again. He pulled back off of Shane, kneeling between his legs.

“Wha-” Shane protested, already cold with the loss of Ilya’s body on his.

“I want to watch you,” Ilya said softly, almost a whisper, like he wasn’t sure he should be saying it.

“What, like yesterday?” Shane asked, somewhat disappointed. It had been hot, but he didn’t just want to get himself off again.

“No,” Ilya shook his head, his eyes dark with desire. “Want to watch you open yourself, with your fingers.”

Shane’s breath hitched, mouth slightly open.

“Oh,” was all he could say. His mind went blank, the idea of fingering himself with Ilya watching — it wiped out all other thoughts.

“Have you done this?” Ilya asked.

“Um,” Shane looked away, knowing he was turning impossibly redder than he already was. “Uh, sorta, yeah. I’ve, like, tried it? I don’t think I was very good at it.” He looked back at Ilya, whose eyes hadn’t moved at all, and chewed his lower lip, desperately nervous now.

“You want to be the best, always,” Ilya huffed a laugh and Shane rolled his eyes but smiled.

“Well, yeah.”

“You will be good, no way you will not be.” It was a refrain Ilya had repeated often, every time he nudged Shane to try something new, whether it was a trick shot or swallowing his come.

The look on Ilya’s face was so sure, his tone so fond, that Shane’s chest tightened. No one in the world had ever had this much faith in Shane, not on the ice and certainly not in bed. Yes, many people had *expectations*, but never so much blind confidence in Shane. But Ilya said things like that with such certainty that Shane almost had no choice but to believe it.

“Okay,” Shane breathed. “I’ll try.”

Ilya nodded and moved off of the bed. He dragged the armchair from the corner of the room over to face the bed and sat, leaving his unbuttoned pants on. Shane propped himself up on his arms, watching as Ilya got himself settled.

“Comfortable over there?” Shane asked with a teasing lilt to his voice.

“Very,” Ilya stuck his tongue out at Shane, imitating Shane on the ice earlier that night.

Shane laughed and asked softly, “So, like, do I get undressed now?”

“You cannot finger yourself with pants on, or can you?”

“You’re a dick,” Shane huffed, but got up and slid down his sweatpants. He hadn’t bothered to put on underwear, and seeing Ilya’s reaction to that fact sent a bolt of sweet satisfaction through Shane.

He sat back down and pulled the bottle of lube out of the nightstand drawer before leaning back on the mountain of pillows behind him. He felt Ilya’s eyes on him the whole time, warming his skin with just his gaze. Shane breathed in deep and let out a long, slow exhale before he looked back up, catching Ilya’s eye, not wanting to speak his uncertainty but asking every question with just a glance.

“Shane,” Ilya breathed roughly. “Touch yourself.”

Shanes’s pulse was thrumming, carrying the gruff, already-wrecked sound of Ilya’s voice to every nerve ending in his body, lighting him up. He closed his eyes, unable to bear the intensity of Ilya’s hot gaze on him any longer, and reached a hand down his stomach, brushing his skin softly as he went. When he reached his cock, he took the rigid length and danced his fingers lightly up and down, making himself

shiver.

Grabbing the lube bottle, he warmed some in his hands and started stroking more steadily, but still unhurried. He got lost in it for a minute or two, enjoying the slow build-up of arousal and the trickle of lube down to his balls. When he used his other hand to gently massage them, he let out a sigh and heard a stifled moan from across the room.

He'd almost forgotten that Ilya was there, watching his every move, and it made Shane shudder. He opened his eyes and saw Ilya leaning forward in his chair, forearms braced on his thighs, a hazy, lust-drunk look on his face. Ilya's eyes flicked from the movement of Shane's hands to his eyes. He had an almost pleading expression on his devastatingly perfect face.

"Good?" Shane asked.

"So good," Ilya replied reverently. "Such a good boy for me."

"Oh god," Shane breathed, more to himself than to Ilya. Ilya had called him a good boy teasingly so many times, but to hear it like this, while he was working himself up under Ilya's intense scrutiny, almost made Shane choke on his own tongue.

Shane bent his knees and spread his legs, allowing Ilya to see everything his hands were doing. He felt so exposed and vulnerable, but not unsafe. He held the reverent sound of Ilya's voice in his mind, gave himself more lube, and began rubbing it below his balls and down towards his hole. The sensation was overwhelming, and he couldn't contain the moan that escaped him. He started rubbing slow circles around his tight opening, eyes closed once again, concentrating on breathing and the surprisingly pleasant feeling of his slick finger against his soft flesh. It was so much better this time, and Shane wasn't sure if it was simply because he was more relaxed, or if it was because Ilya was there encouraging him with this hungry stare.

When he felt warmed up enough, Shane pressed the tip of his finger inside. He and Ilya both sucked in breaths at the same time and Shane's cock twitched against his stomach. He heard Ilya groan as he slowly pushed in, past his first knuckle.

"Shane," Ilya croaked.

"Fuck," Shane whined, "Ilya."

“Good?” Ilya asked, repeating Shane’s question back to him.

“Mmhmm,” Shane swallowed the sound as he squeezed around his finger. It was so much but not nearly enough. “It’s… I need more.”

“Can I?” Ilya asked, voice low and broken. Shane heard a rustle of movement, and he opened his eyes to see Ilya standing. “Have to touch you, Shane. Can give you more. Okay?”

Shane nodded, desperate to feel Ilya on him — in him.

Kneeling between Shane’s legs again, Ilya opened the lube and slicked up two fingers. He mimicked Shane’s earlier circling motion and Shane gasped, the muscle stretched around his own finger tensing under Ilya’s caress, “Fuck yes, so good.”

With his other hand, Ilya took Shane’s dripping cock from him and stroked slowly up and down. He pushed in gradually with one finger, joining Shane’s in an exquisite stretch.

“Oh my god, Ilya,” Shane’s voice was a broken cry of pleasure.

“So beautiful, Shane,” Ilya grumbled and slowly pulled his finger back before pushing it farther in. Shane gently slid his own finger out, allowing Ilya to take over, and surrendered to simply *feeling*.

Ilya set a steady pace, staring down with lips parted, until Shane asked, with a trembling voice, for more.

Ilya gave it to him, twisting in a second finger, and this time curling them up to brush against the sensitive nerve endings inside. Shane clapped a hand over his mouth to stifle the obscene moan that erupted out of him at the sensation. He squeezed his eyes shut, seeing stars, feeling his pulse pounding in his ears. He knew it was only two fingers, but he already felt impossibly full and on the brink.

Ilya leaned over him, hands still working a steady pulse inside and over Shane’s length, and whispered into Shane’s ear, “The whole game, all I am thinking about is this. Your hands on yourself, my fingers inside you, my cock inside you.”

Shane whimpered into his hand and felt tears dripping from the corner of his eyes. He was right on the edge already. He wanted Ilya to fuck him so much, but he feared he was too far gone.

Ilya sat back again, eyes raking over Shane’s flushed body as he began

to buck his hips ever so slightly. Ilya let out a litany of Russian that Shane didn't understand, but he didn't need to, the desperate tone of Ilya's voice told him enough. He was almost as gone as Shane was.

"Oh fuck, please, oh god, I'm gonna come," Shane choked out as Ilya stroked him faster and faster, and slid a third finger inside with a twist. The exquisite fullness and excruciatingly delicious burn were enough to send Shane careening into orgasm. He sobbed out a final "please, Ilya" before squeezing down on Ilya's fingers and coming with a shudder, shooting all over his stomach and chest.

"Yes, sweetheart, give it to me."

He continued the pulse of his fingers and stroked Shane through his release until he whimpered that it was too much. Shane was dripping in sweat and a tear rolled down the side of his face as he heaved deep breaths and rode out the aftershocks of pleasure coursing through him. He was too overwhelmed to register the petname on Ilya's tongue, but Shane's thoughts would surely latch onto that later.

Once his breathing neared a normal rhythm, Ilya slowly pulled his fingers out and wiped them on the sheets. Shane was too wrecked to care about the mess, but not too dazed to realize that Ilya was painfully hard in his trousers that were still zipped up over his straining cock.

"Let me suck you," Shane breathed.

"What? No…," Ilya demurred.

"Please," Shane insisted. "I need to."

Shane was suddenly desperate for it, he didn't care that he was covered in his own come or that his muscles were burning with exhaustion.

He pushed Ilya back and settled between his legs, ripping his zipper down and releasing his heavy cock, which bounced towards Shane's face.

"Will be fast," Ilya panted and carded a hand into Shane's hair as he lowered his mouth. Ilya bucked his hips tentatively, asking, "Okay?"

Shane nodded as much as he could with Ilya's cock filling his mouth, and Ilya thrusted maybe twice before exploding with a grunt, both hands gripping Shane's hair tightly, holding him in place. Shane

pulled off and collapsed back onto the bed, eyes closed, grinning with giddy exhaustion.

Ilya shifted next to Shane, pulling him to his chest and wrapping him up in his large arms and kissing every inch of his face before sliding his mouth onto Shane's and languidly brushing their tongues together. They kissed, sloppy and lazy, for several minutes, letting the quiet of the room overtake them, until Shane was conscious enough to remember that he was covered in rapidly drying ejaculate.

He sighed into Ilya's mouth, Ilya laughing lightly into his.

"You will need to shower, yes?" Ilya asked with a twisted smirk and quirk of a brow. Shane hated how predictable he was, yet he loved that Ilya knew him so well.

"How did you know that's what I was going to say?"

Ilya gave him a look that said, *"Are you really asking me that right now?"*

Shane laughed and pushed lightly against Ilya's chest, retorting weakly, "Whatever. Come on, let's clean up."

Ilya pulled him back in and nibbled on Shane's earlobe, tickling him so much that he kicked his feet and wailed, "What the hell, quit it!"

With a lick to soothe where he'd just nibbled, Ilya tittered, "Quit it!" His mocking sounded so ridiculous wrapped up in his thick accent that Shane dissolved further into a fit of giggles. Ilya finally released him and rolled onto his back. Shane climbed out of the mess of sheets and blankets, but Ilya remained, arms and legs splayed wide, his dick hanging limply out of his pants still.

"Too tired to move," he complained.

"If you don't shower, you can sleep in that bed alone. I'm taking the clean one for myself," Shane threatened, and Ilya popped up immediately.

"That's what I thought," Shane chuckled, turning to the bathroom.

After they got clean, dry, and dressed in fresh pajamas, they slid into the cool, clean sheets of the other bed that had so far gone unused. They were both lying on their backs, looking up at the ceiling, arms pressed together between them.

“Thank you,” Ilya whispered into the dark room.

Shane bit his lips between his teeth, even though Ilya wouldn’t have been able to see him smile anyway.

“What for?”

“You… did what I wanted.”

“I said I would.”

“Yes, but —”

“I wanted to,” Shane cut Ilya off before he could protest. He turned his head to face Ilya, who turned his own head at the same moment. In the dark, he could just make out the shimmer of gold in Ilya’s eyes. “Really.”

“Okay,” Ilya whispered.

“I actually…” Shane started, but trailed off.

“Actually what?” Ilya asked, not pressuring, just curious.

Shane steeled himself, the darkness making him more brave than he would have been in the light. “I actually thought you were going to fuck me. I’m sorry,” He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I came so fast.”

If Ilya had stayed silent any longer, Shane would have started to freak out, so he was relieved when Ilya breathed, “Stop saying sorry every second.”

It was another thing Ilya repeated often, but Shane was terrible at heeding his words.

He continued, “Was so fucking hot, Shane. Exactly what I wanted.”

Shane knew he should accept that at face value and not push, but his bone-deep insecurity won out. “So… you don’t want to fuck me anymore?”

Ilya snorted. “Do not be stupid, Hollander.”

“What??” Shane feigned confusion.

“Was tonight only night I can fuck you? All other nights not allowed?”

“I guess not…”

“Good. Another time.”

A beat passed.

“Only if you want…” Ilya added.

“Yes,” Shane rushed to say. “Yes, I do. I want to. Soon.”

Ilya turned fully onto his side now, and manhandled Shane until he was also on his side, back to Ilya. Shane let him do it, loved feeling small and malleable in Ilya’s hands. He tugged Shane flush against his chest.

“Soon,” Ilya sighed out. “Goodnight, Shane.”

“Goodnight, Ilya.” Shane drifted off fast, as he always did in Ilya’s arms.

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Ilya called him good boy. Ilya called him *sweetheart*. It was all Shane could think about. Well, almost all he could think about. He was also thinking *a lot* about coming with Ilya’s fingers inside him, and wondering more than ever before how it would feel to have more of Ilya inside him. But *sweetheart*. That wasn’t casual. That wasn’t blowjobs between friends. That was… god help him, Shane needed to stop… that was the kind of thing *boyfriends* said.

Get your head out of your ass, Shane thought to himself, and turned his head to look out the window of the car. They had a late red-eye back to Ottawa, so they made a plan to go to the beach for a few hours early in the morning to take full advantage of their time in southern California. Delzy had taken off already, opting to spend the rest of their week off visiting his family in British Columbia instead of going back to Ontario with Shane and Ilya.

From last night until they arrived back home, this would be the longest stretch of time Shane and Ilya spent alone together — no teammates, no responsibilities, just free time and each other. It was thrilling and terrifying, and Shane only hoped that they didn’t land in Ottawa the next morning sick of each other.

They began with a run along the water, which of course turned into a race, and ended with Ilya grabbing Shane by the arm and pulling him

back to claim the win.

“It doesn’t count as a win if you cheat!” Shane called, catching his breath.

“No refs here to judge — I win!” Ilya called back. He plopped down onto the sand, took off his shoes and socks, and let the soft waves spill over his bare feet as he leaned back on his hands, head to the sky, eyes closed.

Shane stared, transfixed by the way the sun shone on Ilya’s hair, turning his light brown curls to spun gold. The sweat on his heaving chest mirrored the twinkling water, and the light caught on his golden crucifix. Shane was spellbound and completely, utterly infatuated. This was so bad. But it was so fucking good.

“Sit with me, do not be sore loser,” Ilya sighed, clearly unaware of the effect he was having on Shane.

“I’m not a sore loser, I just don’t want my ass to get sandy.”

Ilya laughed and looked at Shane with an evil glint in his eye that let Shane know his ass would be getting sandy whether he liked it or not. So he sat, mimicked Ilya’s pose, and let the sound of the ocean waves ease his racing mind.

“I think this is the best weekend of my life,” Shane mused.

Ilya hummed and shifted his hand in the sand so his pinky touched Shane’s. It was *by far* the best weekend of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Is everyone freaking out about the show coming out in NOVEMBER!? (for the lucky Canadians among us at least.)

Chapter 14: Ilya Interlude #7

Ilya was mature enough to admit to himself that being at the All-Star Game was pretty fucking cool. He wouldn't admit it to *anyone else*, but he'd allow himself to recognize it. And maybe he'd let Shane see him smiling at the billboard with their faces on it, that wouldn't be so bad. Fuck, he was going *so* soft.

If you told Ilya one year ago the shit he had said in that video about Shane, he would have laughed in your face and said, "Who?" knowing full well who Shane Hollander was. His Team Russia teammates certainly thought he'd gone soft, telling him that he'd become too Canadian already and he needed to get back to Moscow as soon as the season ended to toughen up again for Worlds. So they were also assuming Ottawa wouldn't make it to the playoffs. Fuck those guys.

Ilya had always had lots of friends on his teams, lots of friends everywhere he went. Friends to party with, friends to play hockey with, friends to fuck. But the people who actually cared about *him* and not his stats, his ability to charm a bouncer, or his *dick*, were few and far between. His mother, when she was alive. Svetlana, when she was in Russia in the summers before her family settled full-time in North America. Nikolai, his coach's son who he tried desperately to push away, and eventually did after getting what he wanted out of him. And now Shane.

Shane Hollander was an anomaly that could not be explained. So Ilya had stopped trying.

And he really didn't appreciate Shane cockblocking himself and Ilya in the process with some stupid sense of what — competition? Propriety? Fucking stupid is what it was. And annoying. And cute, god damn it.

It was cute how starstruck Shane was by the whole All-Star weekend.

It was cute how Shane thought Delzy didn't know they were fucking. (Ilya respected Delzy for letting Shane keep thinking that.)

It was cute how shocked Shane was that he was drafted first. What an idiot, of course he was.

It was cute how badly Shane wanted to win and how easy it was to distract him on the ice now that Ilya knew exactly how to get under his skin. He thought absently, as they prepared for their first face-off,

that he may not have been able to resist Shane even if they hadn't been drafted to the same team.

Because it was fucking *cute* how intense Shane was, about everything, but especially about hockey.

Ilya really had wanted to fuck him. Still did. Always would, probably. But god damn, watching Shane take himself apart was a decadence Ilya had never experienced before.

He'd thought of it while watching Shane score a goal against him. He was spectacular, commanding, precise. And in that moment, Ilya wanted to see his precision unravel at his own hand.

Of course, Ilya couldn't keep his hands off of Shane for long. He was a sweating, panting mess in less than 5 minutes, and it was breathtaking. *Shane* was breathtaking, and Ilya couldn't keep it in. He'd been wise enough to use Russian when telling Shane exactly how he felt.

"The Russians think I've gone weak. They have no idea how weak I am for you. I would fold and bend and do whatever you wanted if you asked, beautiful boy."

But he slipped up. He switched back to English. He'd called him *sweetheart.* Jesus.

He showed his hand. Ilya could tell by the look on Shane's face the next morning on the beach. He knew Ilya was getting attached, as attached as Shane was from the jump. But Ilya couldn't stop, he couldn't save himself.

So they spent the day together, first at the beach, where Ilya nearly lost his shit on a long-haired surfer who was apparently a huge hockey fan and couldn't take his eyes off of Shane's chest while he flirted relentlessly and ignored Ilya's existence. Shane didn't even notice the blatant come-on, and Ilya pulled him away with a glare back at the surfer dude that Shane had blamed on Ilya being "hangry," whatever that was.

Then at McDonald's — where Shane blushed as he pulled out his fucking gift card and Ilya melted. Then back in the hotel room, laughing through lazy, languid blowjobs before packing up and making their way to the airport.

On the plane, they gossiped about their All-Stars teammates, who had

the weirdest rituals, laughing about the goalie on Shane's team who named every net in every arena, and remembered their names, greeting them every time he returned. Goalies were fucking weird.

He tried to get Shane to join him in the airplane bathroom, but Shane flat-out refused, and somehow that was adorable too.

When they parted at the airport, they lingered in the parking garage, neither of them wanting to say goodbye. When they finally parted, Ilya sat in his car watching as Shane drove away in his stupid, sensible Jeep Cherokee.

Ilya was weak. But Shane was right. It was the best weekend of his life.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

A hot new bombshell has entered the villa...

It's Jackie (soon to be) Pike.

Chapter Notes

We're closing in on the home stretch here, thank you all for sticking with this fic!

Nico, Paupy, and dntat, the best betas in the biz ❤ (Everyone go read all their fics, I'm so serious, you better do it.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane walked into his apartment, exhausted and riding an oxytocin high from spending 24 continuous hours with Ilya. Hayden would probably still be asleep, so Shane tried to close the door and take off his shoes as silently as he could.

He had to decide if he was going to nap and further mess with his circadian rhythm or push through the day, and he wandered into the kitchen while he pondered the merits of each option. In his sleepy stupor, he didn't realize he was walking directly into someone. But… it wasn't Hayden?

Nope, definitely not Hayden. It was a girl. Wearing Hayden's old oversized (at least on her) juniors team t-shirt — and nothing else.

"What the — who are you!?"

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!"

They both yelled simultaneously, stumbling back from each other with wide eyes.

When Shane noticed she — was this the Jackie Hayden had mentioned? — wasn't wearing pants, he blushed and covered his eyes with his hands.

"Oh, you're Shane Hollander, oh my god, hi!" Probably-Jackie said excitedly.

“Uh, yep,” Shane nodded, hand still in front of his eyes. “You’re uh… here with Hayden?”

“Yeah, sorry for being in your kitchen without any pants on! We thought you weren’t going to be back until tomorrow. Let me just… I’ll go grab Hayden.”

Shane heard footsteps and cautiously peeked through his fingers to find that she was gone. That was a relief. Not knowing what to do with himself now, Shane sank down onto the couch. Exhaustion was slowing his brain function, and it did not help that there was a stranger in his apartment, making it impossible to relax.

Less than a minute later, Hayden was hurrying out to the kitchen/ living room area, pulling on a t-shirt and saying, “Shane! Hey! What are you doing home?”

“I flew in this morning, I told you I would be, remember?”

“Oh shit, I thought it was tomorrow. Sorry bud, I would have at least warned you that Jackie was going to be here.”

Shane stood to talk to Hayden, and saw Jackie coming in behind him, now wearing sweatpants and a hoodie and a sheepish look on her face.

“Nope, it was always today. But don’t worry about it, sorry for um… interrupting.”

“I was just about to make some coffee, that’s really it,” Jackie clarified.

“Oh, I can do that,” Shane offered, manners automatically kicking in.

“Nah, let us do it, you look like hell,” Hayden said.

“Gee thanks,” Shane rolled his eyes, but moved to sit down on a kitchen bar stool, while the other two got out the coffee stuff.

After a few minutes, Shane quickly realized that Jackie was actually pretty great. She was objectively hot, she knew hockey yet didn’t make a big deal about them being in the NHL, and she was smart — at university for something science-related that Shane didn’t quite understand. Hayden was definitely punching above his weight, but she seemed totally smitten, laughing at all the dumb things Hayden said, and generally unable to stop touching him.

He wondered if that's how he was around Ilya, and the thought was bittersweet. On one hand, he liked the idea that they could be physically close and have it interpreted as friendship, but on the other, he was really starting to wish he could have this — spending time with Ilya with Hayden, being affectionate, rubbing his arm. What would that feel like, to be witnessed in his affection?

"So how was the All-Star weekend?" Hayden eventually asked, interrupting Shane's wistful train of thought.

"I mean, did you watch the game?" Shane asked, skeptically.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Really looked like you had them in the beginning, though!" Hayden said placatingly. "Was it weird playing against Roz? Damn, we're lucky to have him on our team."

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Shane laughed. "It was weird, I kept wanting to pass to him and then remembering not to."

Jackie piped in, "He was playing so hard, you'd have thought it was a playoff game! I guess he's really competitive?"

Shane prayed he wasn't turning bright pink, but knew it was inevitable.

"Uh, yeah," Shane replied. "He, um, really wanted to win." He didn't need to clarify *why* exactly Ilya wanted to win so badly.

"The announcers wouldn't stop talking about you guys, it was kind of hilarious." Hayden said.

"Really?" Shane wasn't sure how he felt about that, after everything Marks had said. "What were they saying?"

"Oh, you know, just talking about you being friends off the ice, comparing your stats, showing clips of some of your powerplay goals off Roz assists, stuff like that. Just, you know, Ottawa is so lucky to have two of the best new talents in decades, the usual." Hayden ended his last sentence with an eye roll, and Shane felt a twang of guilt. It must be weird for him, being in Shane and Ilya's shadow.

"Ottawa is lucky to have you too, Hayden," Jackie said and kissed him sweetly on the cheek. Hayden blushed and looked at Jackie like he might propose any minute. Shane liked her a lot. And it was time for him to retreat to his bedroom.

He didn't mean to, but Shane fell asleep before he could even change out of his clothes from the plane. When he woke up, Jackie was gone, and Hayden was playing video games in the living room.

"Hey, you're alive!" Hayden called from the couch.

"I feel like death. I was awake the whole plane ride."

"Oh shit, couldn't sleep?"

More like, *didn't want to miss a moment with Ilya*. But sure, let's go with "couldn't sleep."

"Yeah. The jet lag isn't as bad when we're in a different spot every day, but after four days in LA, my body started adjusting."

"So…" Hayden paused his game. "What do you think?"

"Of what?" He was too tired for confusing questions.

"Of *Jackie*?!"

"Oh, yeah." Right. Jackie. "She's awesome Hayden. Way too good for you, really."

"Hey!" Hayden playfully shoved Shane's side as he sat down on the couch, too. "I mean, you're right, she is way too good for me. But I think she really likes me too…"

"She definitely does, I can tell."

"You think? Really?"

"Totally, buddy, she's really into you, she couldn't stop touching you, I felt like I needed to leave the room."

"Yeah," Hayden sighed with a dreamy look on his face. "Damn, I think she might be the one."

"You've known her for, what? A month?" Shane asked skeptically.

"Yep, a month this weekend," Hayden smiled blissfully, not aware that Shane was questioning his sanity. "Is it okay if she hangs out here some more this week? Her roommate is super loud and messy apparently…"

Shane snorted.

"...and I think I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend at dinner tomorrow night!"

"Uh, sure," Shane said. He liked Jackie, he was happy for Hayden. He could be flexible and accommodating about this, right?

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Two days later, Shane felt like he had two roommates. Jackie basically hadn't left. There were perks — she was much neater than Hayden, and Hayden was trying to impress her, so he was doing dishes promptly for the first time ever. But Shane was also spending most of his week off hiding in his room or trying to find excuses to get out of the apartment.

He went home to his parents' house for dinner both nights, which was always delicious, and he loved hearing his mom simultaneously shit-talking and heaping praise on Ilya when they recapped the All-Star game. They were in the middle of a frigid cold snap, Shane couldn't really run outside, and he was getting sick of his apartment building's gym, spending more time there than usual to give Hayden and Jackie space.

On Thursday, with only one more day before they were back to their regular schedule, Hayden told Shane he was taking Jackie out to a fancy restaurant that night and he was going to ask her to be his girlfriend. Shane was sure she'd say yes, and that meant he probably didn't want to be at the apartment when they got back from dinner. But his parents had tickets to a play or something, and he didn't want to just hang out at their house alone.

So, Shane worked up his courage and decided to text Ilya. Super chill. No pressure. Just two teammates hanging out.

Shane: hey what r u doing tonite?

Ilya: nothing

Shane: mr. party guy with no plans on fri nite?

Ilya: mr. party guy?

Shane: shut up. so no plans, really?

Ilya: no. why?

Shane: hayden has a new girlfriend. or will after dinner. hes asking her and i wanna get out of here.

Ilya didn't respond for a few minutes, and Shane was worried he pushed his luck. They had a strict no-hookups-at-home rule, and Shane knew the implication was that he wanted to break it. He returned to his assumption that Ilya had a girl — or multiple girls — in town who he regularly saw. Maybe he had told Shane he didn't have plans because he didn't want to say he invited one of these girls over to fuck.

Ilya: come over here? i am going to cook. could make more.

Shane: you cook?

Ilya: you do not?

Shane: no i do

(It was sort of true.)

Ilya: ok, we both cook. you want to get away from hayden or no?

Shane: when can i come over?

Ilya: any time. now.

Shane: its 4pm.

Ilya: oh my god hollander

Shane: i'll be there in 30 minutes :P

Now Shane had a decision to make. Was this going to be a friend-hang? Should he clarify that with Ilya? Or should he just make sure he was ready to go for a more than friend hang? Oh god, he really wanted it to be more.

Thirty minutes later, Shane was riding the elevator up to Ilya's apartment on the 20th floor. His heart was racing as he was flooded with memories from Christmas, when he was last here. Crying, mortified, and afraid Ilya would never speak to him again. But he was also remembering the life-altering kiss he and Ilya had shared. It was, in Shane's humble opinion, the best kiss of all time. He could hardly believe that it had only been about six weeks since that day. That crying, terrified version of Shane felt a lifetime away.

But the nerves — those were the same. Shane wondered if he'd ever get over the jittery anticipation he felt when he was going to be alone with Ilya. Every time, he still had a nagging fear churning in his stomach that *this time* Ilya would reject him, tell him they needed to stop, tell him he had fallen in love with a girl.

But Ilya had invited Shane here tonight. He wouldn't do that just to send Shane away. He took a deep breath as he walked down the hall to Ilya's apartment, reminded himself that they'd just had a perfect day together in LA, and knocked.

Ilya opened the door, and Shane swallowed hard. Ilya was shirtless and his hair was damp, looking like he just got out of the shower. He was wearing low-slung sweatpants that left almost nothing to the imagination. The sweats were loose, and the waistband of his boxers was visible, which was somehow hotter than not being able to see them at all.

"Will you come in or just stand here?"

Shane cleared his throat and snapped his gaze from the trail of hair disappearing into Ilya's pants back to his eyes. He was wearing a satisfied smirk, and Shane screwed up his face in annoyance at having been caught staring. Ilya opened the door like this to torture Shane, didn't he?

Shane brushed past him into the apartment, fresh memories of Christmas returning to the front of his mind.

"Um, so what are you up to?" Shane asked, internally begging himself to be relaxed and nonchalant as he meandered towards the open-concept living room.

"Was watching tv." Ilya walked up behind him, gesturing to the muted TV that appeared to be showing some legal procedural show. "Helps with English."

"Oh yeah, are you going to become a lawyer?" Shane asked with a laugh.

"Objection," Ilya enunciated slowly and seriously, pointing at Shane. He laughed, feeling his nerves settle in the familiar comfort of joking with Ilya. "See? I am already great lawyer. Want a beer?"

"Sure, thanks." Shane followed Ilya to the kitchen, leaning on the counter while Ilya grabbed two cans and handed him one.

“So what is this about Hayden’s girlfriend?” Ilya asked, sipping his beer. Shane tried not to stare too hard at the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“Um, yeah, her name is Jackie,” Shane sipped his own beer. “I guess she spent the whole All-Star weekend at our place, and now they’re in love or something. She’s over pretty much every day now.”

“Annoying.”

“I mean, she’s cool, I like her so far,” Shane hedged, not wanting to throw Hayden under the bus too much. “But yeah, it’s a lot having another person there all the time. So thanks for giving me somewhere to be.”

“Had to cancel my party, but this is good too.”

Shane laughed and felt himself blushing, “Stop it, you are a party guy usually! I thought you’d be going out with Lapierre tonight or something.”

“Bleh, Lapierre has terrible taste in clubs. And is too cold outside. Even for Russians.”

“Well, I appreciate it.”

Ilya smiled, that perfectly imperfect crooked smile that made Shane’s heart flutter, and they sipped their beers in silence for a minute. A ripple of tension swelled between them until Shane couldn’t take the quiet any longer.

“So… um… I know we have our like, rule, or whatever,” Shane ducked his head, overwhelmed by the sight of Ilya so gently relaxed in his home, needing to stop staring at the flex of his bicep every time brought the can to his lips. “But were you… you know… fuck, I’m so bad at this.”

He looked pleadingly up at Ilya who was grinning through another sip of his beer.

“Go on,” Ilya prompted, eyebrows raised.

“Ilya.” Shane said sternly. Ilya knew perfectly well what he was asking.

“Shaaane,” Ilya teased back at him.

Taking a steadying breath, Shane continued, “Do you… would you… are we going to—”

Before Shane could get his damn question out, Ilya gently placed his beer on the counter, taking one long stride towards Shane and planting his hands on the counter, boxing Shane in.

“We are going to,” Ilya answered, putting Shane out of his misery with a kiss.

Shane sighed into his mouth and lifted himself backwards up on the counter, so Ilya didn’t need to bend to reach him. Ilya nudged Shane’s knees apart, making room for himself to get even closer, and took hold of Shane’s waist, sliding his thumbs under the hem of his shirt and pressing, earning a gasp from Shane. They kissed, slow and sweet, for long minutes, soft sighs and moans the only sound in Ilya’s apartment.

When they finally pulled apart, Ilya’s hands were in Shane’s hair, and Shane had slid his around to Ilya’s bare back. They were both hard, pressing into each other, and breathing heavily.

“Is this okay?” Shane asked, able to speak now that the tension was broken. “I know you said we would only hook up on road trips, and I didn’t want to assume anything.”

Ilya pressed his hips forward slightly to rub his bulge against Shane’s and replied with a chuckle, “Obviously is okay.”

“Okay cool…” Shane trailed off, not totally satisfied with that answer, but Ilya had started kissing his neck. Shane huffed a small sigh and Ilya stopped.

“What is it?” Ilya asked — always able to read Shane like a damn book.

“Well, like, I was just wondering, since we never really talked about it, and like, it’s not a big deal at all, I just thought that…” Shane hated that he couldn’t just say what he wanted to say, but every time he tried to ask Ilya something serious, his tongue got twisted and tangled and he forgot how to form a complete sentence.

“Shane,” Ilya grasped Shane’s hips with a tight, grounding squeeze and rested his forehead on Shane’s shoulder in exasperation.

“Fuck, sorry,” Shane said, then added, “I know, stop apologizing. Fuck

it. Have you been hooking up with other people? When we're home? Like since we started doing this?"

He exhaled sharply, relieved that he finally got it out. Ilya lifted his head and Shane searched his face — his brows were knit together, looking like he was trying to solve a puzzle.

"Have you?" Ilya finally asked in response.

Shane snorted, "No, definitely not." Then he added ruefully, "There's no way you thought I was."

Ilya smirked.

"Don't look so satisfied!" Shane shoved him lightly on the shoulder and Ilya snickered.

"I am also not." Ilya stroked his hands down Shane's sides as he answered, and Shane shivered.

"Oh," a smile crept across Shane's face, surprised relief washing over him. "So, uh, does that mean we're—"

Ilya cut him off with a kiss to the forehead and said, "Enough talk," before scooping his arms under Shane's ass and thighs and hoisting him off the counter, forcing Shane to wrap his legs around Ilya's waist and arms around his neck.

"What the hell!?" Shane yelped. "Where are you taking me?!"

"Bed," Ilya huffed, and Shane was relieved it wasn't *that* easy to carry him. Ilya was big, but Shane was a professional hockey player, damn it.

Fuck this, Ilya couldn't always have the upper hand. Shane snaked his hands up into Ilya's hair and kissed his neck while he carried him, and Ilya groaned, "Not fair, Hollander."

Shane didn't answer, just scraped his teeth across Ilya's neck, feeling suddenly feral and barely restraining the urge to bite him, to consume him.

"Fuck," Ilya hissed, as they had reached the bedroom. He leaned forward to drop Shane softly onto his welcoming bed.

It was so much nicer than a hotel room, so much less sterile and stiff. The sheets were soft and smelled like *Ilya* and Shane inhaled deeply as

he took in the towering figure of Ilya before him, chest heaving from the effort of carrying Shane, dick hard and tenting his sweatpants. Ilya's eyes blazed and he licked his lips, looking at Shane like he was a predator and Shane was the meal he'd captured.

They were frozen like that, staring at each other intently. The knowledge that they were passing yet another threshold, destroying yet another boundary, was crackling through the air like invisible sparks of lightning. It was electric, exciting yet dangerous, taking one step deeper into this *thing* they were doing, both knowing better and neither caring.

The only thought in Shane's head was *fuck me, fuck me, fuck me*, on repeat. He thought it so hard, trying to telepathically communicate to Ilya that he was ready, he wanted it, he *needed* it. That night after the All-Star game was perfect as it was, yet still not enough, and he desperately wanted Ilya to take over.

To urge him on, Shane reached behind his neck and pulled his t-shirt off. Ilya licked his lips again and Shane held in a whimper. He was going to have to take what he wanted. Sitting up, Shane found his face inches away from Ilya's erection. He looked up through his eyelashes, catching Ilya's dark gaze, and snaked two fingers into the waistband that had been taunting Shane since he arrived. He tugged, slightly, asking for permission.

Ilya obliged, thumbing down the sweats and boxers just enough to release his thick, rigid cock. Thinking about that being *inside him* was both thrilling and intimidating at once.

"You're so big," Shane whispered, feeling stupid as soon as he said it.

Ilya rolled his eyes with a fond smile. "This is new to you?"

Shane huffed and sat back on his legs, and Ilya caressed Shane's cheek softly with a calloused thumb. Shane leaned into his palm as if by reflex.

"It will fit. We go slow, okay?"

"Okay," Shane whispered. "First, can I?"

If Shane thought about it too much, he'd hate how much he loves having Ilya's dick in his mouth. It felt wrong to be so turned on by it, but he couldn't help it, and he had been cataloging Ilya's reactions, every moan and leg twitch and tug of Shane's hair — so he could give

Ilya exactly what he needed every time.

He leaned forward, mouth open. Ilya's hand, still holding Shane's face, guided him to his cock. Shane's mouth was already watering as he lapped lightly at the protruding head, and Ilya hissed in pleasure. Shane took him deeper and began bobbing and sucking, losing himself in the motions and Ilya's encouraging grunts and gasps.

After a couple of minutes, though, Ilya tugged lightly on Shane's hair, pulling him off.

"Shane, please, need to fuck you," he choked out. Shane had rarely heard him this desperate — all of Shane's nerve-endings were on fire with need and a surprising sense of power. Ilya was desperate for *him. Only him.*

"Where should I…how do you want me?" Shane asked, shy again.

"On your back," Ilya said, walking back to his dresser to grab a bottle Shane assumed was lube.

Shane shifted back, leaning against the pillows, turning his head to inhale Ilya's scent again, feeling his dick twitch from the musky smell alone. He was buzzing with nerves, his heart beating so hard in his chest that he had to put a hand there to calm himself. His dick was almost pulsing with need, aching for Ilya's touch.

Ilya crawled up the bed to Shane, hovering over him before beginning to kiss his way down Shane's chest to his clenched abs, licking the hard muscle there before shifting to settle between Shane's legs. He stripped off Shane's pants and boxer briefs, and began planting delicate, wet kisses to Shane's soft inner thighs, fully lost in the moment. Shane propped himself up on his elbows to watch, lips slightly parted in pure awe. *How was this real?*

Slowly trailing kisses towards Shane's desperate cock, Ilya finally gave Shane some relief, sliding his tongue along the head and taking it fully in his mouth. Shane hadn't come since they were in California 3 days ago, and that was not that long for him, but right now it may as well have been a year for how on-edge he already was.

"Ilya… oh god… wait…"

Ilya lifted his eyes, stopping his movements, but not releasing Shane from his mouth. The image would be burned in Shane's memory: Ilya, eyes glazed and pupils wide, holding him in his mouth, looking

questioningly up at him. Shane wished he could take a picture.

“I’m… too close…” Shane breathed, trying to pull himself back from the edge. “I don’t want to come yet.”

Ilya pulled off of him, clearly trying not to smirk and mostly failing, and he reached for the lube he’d placed next to them.

“Okay?” He asked, gesturing with the bottle.

Shane nodded, too worked up to speak.

Ilya pushed Shane’s knees up a little more, spread them a little wider, exposing Shane the same way he had been laid out in their LA hotel room. It felt just as vulnerable this time, but Shane felt just as cared for as he did then.

Softly, with a single lubed finger, Ilya started rubbing slow circles around Shane’s hole. Shane breathed deeply, the sensation still so new to him, but so unbearably good. He needed more, but knew they needed to go slow if he was going to actually enjoy himself.

“Before you came here… did you prepare for me?” Ilya whispered, continuing his soft caresses of Shane’s hole.

“Yes,” Shane sighed out, as Ilya pushed lightly, not all the way in, but working his way there.

“You wanted this,” Ilya whispered — a statement, not a question, almost more to himself than to Shane.

“Yes,” Shane eked out the word again, clenching and unclenching on Ilya’s finger.

“So fucking eager for me,” Ilya finally pushed in, and Shane made a high-pitched sound he’d never heard from himself before.

Something about the way Ilya said that — *so fucking eager for me* — made Shane cry out in desperation.

He was — eager and desperate. He craved this like nothing else he had ever experienced. He should have felt embarrassed, and a part of him did. But a much bigger part took Ilya’s observation for what it was — praise, appreciation, understanding. Ilya *saw* Shane. From the moment they started practicing together that summer, Ilya saw beneath the surface, and for whatever reason, he liked what he saw in

Shane. And it would be Shane's undoing.

Ilya slid his finger in and out, returning to kissing lightly along Shane's inner thighs, helping Shane relax and drop into the pleasurable sensuality of being stretched. Ilya pulled out, then pushed back in with two fingers, and Shane clenched, then relaxed with a soft "oh."

"Good?" Ilya asked.

"So so good, so good," Shane mumbled, dazed.

"One more?"

"Fuck, yes, please," Shane whined.

Ilya got more lube, then slipped a third finger in, and Shane hissed at the slight burn of being stretched. Ilya added even more lube, then curled his fingers and started stroking inside. The burn was immediately replaced by a searing pleasure that had Shane starting to sweat. They stayed like that, Ilya reverently kissing Shane's thighs, stretching Shane with his fingers, until Shane felt so desperate that he might burst.

"I think… fuck… yeah… mmm… I think I'm ready," Shane exhaled.

"Okay." Ilya slowly pulled out his fingers, and Shane let out a slight "ah!" at the sudden emptiness.

"Turn over for me." Ilya spoke with a tender yet commanding voice that made Shane think he'd do just about anything Ilya asked of him, he would beg if he had to. Shane did as he was told, getting on all fours, feeling even more exposed now with his ass up and head bowed. He felt the cool air of the room on his lubed hole, and it was at once terrifying and electrifying.

A sudden bolt of nerves shot through Shane, and he asked timidly, "You've done this before, right?"

Ilya chuckled lightly and palmed Shane's cheeks with his large, warm hands.

"Yes. Will make it good for you. Trust me."

Shane regretted asking, because now he was just thinking about who else Ilya might have had in this position. Fuck.

“Relax, любимый,” Ilya whispered a word in Russian that Shane didn’t know, but it sounded so good, and he let Ilya soothe him with another circle of his finger on Shane’s prepped hole.

The sound of the condom wrapper reached Shane’s ears as Ilya gently pushed in his thumb one more time. Shane appreciated how careful Ilya was being, but he was about to scream with need.

“I’m ready. Please, Ilya,” Shane whined.

And without another word, Ilya rocked the thick head of his cock in slowly, breaching the tight ring of muscle.

“Oh fuck,” Shane whimpered, overwhelmed by the stretch. It wasn’t bad, not at all, but it was strange and *a lot*. He flexed the stretched muscle, testing the feeling and adjusting to the sensation. Ilya moaned, gripping Shane’s hips tightly, then smoothing a hand up Shane’s back, pressing forward a bit farther.

“Okay?” Ilya asked, his voice gruff and raw.

“Yes fuck yes,” Shane breathed. “So good. More. Please.”

Ilya let out a low grumble and obliged, holding Shane’s hips and pushing until his length was fully inside of Shane.

“Oh my god, wow, fuck, okay, wow, yeah that’s a lot.” Shane was babbling, he couldn’t stop. His body was trembling with the exhilaration of being so full. And because he was Shane, he had to ask, “Is it… is it okay for you?”

“Shane,” Ilya breathed. “God. Yes. Fuck.”

Ilya groaned and started to pull out, then thrust back in, once, twice, until he was setting a slow steady rhythm and grunting lightly with every pulse of his hips.

Shane dropped down to his elbows, and the change of angle made him cry out, the slide of Ilya’s cock pressing in just right. Shane was losing his mind, every inch of his body was on fire and his cock was throbbing with need.

“You take me so good. I will not last.” Ilya was panting, losing his restraint and fucking harder into Shane. All Shane could do was surrender to him.

“Me either. Fuck I want to come but I don’t want you to ever stop.”

Ilya laughed breathlessly, keeping his powerful pace.

“You are so good for me, Shane, so perfect, your ass,” Ilya gripped Shane tight, wrenching him backward by the hips.

Shane’s dick needed attention *now*. It was so hard and had gone untouched far too long, so Shane reached a hand between his legs and sighed with the relief of it, the unbridled pleasure of it.

“Ilya, oh god Ilya, I —“

“Come for me. I am so close. Want to feel you come on my cock.”

Those words sent a shockwave through Shane and he erupted with a whimper, hips rocking forward with each wave of his orgasm. The intensity of his hole flexing around Ilya’s cock while he gasped and moaned and spilled into his hand was intoxicating — the pressure and overstimulation like nothing he’d ever felt before. Ilya’s thrusts finally stuttered as he squeezed Shane’s hips and pulled them flush with his own, coming with a choked groan.

“Oh fuck,” Shane cried, feeling Ilya pulsing inside of him in waves until he stilled. It intensified everything, and Shane felt himself teetering on the edge of consciousness. Ilya was breathing hard and muttering in Russian, which was so fucking sexy Shane didn’t even care that he didn’t know what he was saying.

They breathed together like that for a long moment, Ilya caressing Shane’s back in long soothing motions down, coming down from the explosive high. Eventually Ilya leaned forward and said softly, “pulling out now” into Shane’s ear.

Shane still couldn’t form a coherent thought, so he simply nodded, then felt the slide of Ilya’s cock and sudden shock of emptiness when he pulled out. Ilya collapsed to the side, pulling Shane with him. Shane flipped around, he wanted to see Ilya’s face, see if he looked as wrecked as Shane felt.

And he fucking did.

His eyes were closed and he was still breathing hard. Shane reached out his clean hand to brush sweat-slick curls from Ilya’s forehead, and Ilya captured his wrist, gently kissing Shane’s palm. Shane melted under the sweetness of the gesture, and he palmed Ilya’s cheek

affectionately.

Ilya opened his eyes and said, “Will be right back, do not move.”

“I don’t think I could move if I wanted to,” Shane sighed.

“Good,” Ilya flashed him a smile, then went to deal with the condom and get some washcloths to clean them both up.

“You feel okay?” Ilya asked, once he had them both cleaned up and tucked under his duvet, limbs tangled, concern in his furrowed brow.

“I feel so far beyond okay, I feel amazing,” Shane’s veins were still thrumming with tingly aftershocks. He sighed, closing his eyes, letting his words sink in. When Ilya didn’t immediately say anything, Shane had to ask, “Um, was it okay for you?”

“Yes,” Ilya hummed. “Perfect.”

They kissed lazily, basking in the post-sex glow, until Ilya’s stomach grumbled.

“Oh, shit, you were going to make dinner, and I totally interrupted your night.” Shane didn’t exactly feel bad, though.

“This is good kind of interruption,” Ilya laughed. “But we should eat.”

Neither of them moved, too comfortably cocooned in Ilya’s bed.

“What were you planning on cooking?” Shane asked. He loved getting this look into Ilya’s home life that he never saw.

“Pasta and sauce with meat,” Ilya said, shrugging as much as he could with Shane pressed up against him. “Maybe salad, garlic bread. Not fancy.”

“That sounds amazing to me.” Shane was impressed. “I don’t actually cook that much. I still have dinner with my parents pretty often when we’re home.”

“Very cute, very Shane thing to do,” Ilya teased.

“You could totally come over some time, my mom would *love it.”* She really would. Shane would too. Then his stomach growled, so they begrudgingly got out of bed.

Shane was grateful that Ilya put a shirt on — he was totally spent, but

watching Ilya cooking bare-chested might give Shane a second wind, and they really did need to eat. But it turned out that watching Ilya cook with a shirt on was hot enough to get Shane worked up again anyway. He moved with confidence in the kitchen, not using a recipe. Shane was impressed, and once again felt very young and inexperienced. Ilya was a man, and Shane couldn't help but feel boyish in comparison. They were only a year apart, but Shane felt it in that moment.

Ilya put on some music to cook to, Shane helped prepare the salad, and when everything was done, they sat down next to each other at the kitchen bar to eat. It all felt very domestic and couple-y in a way that had Shane hoping for too much.

"So, um, that was really good," Shane said in a casual tone before taking a bite, not feeling casual at all.

"Should do it again some day," Ilya said equally casually.

"Right, yeah," Shane smiled around his forkful of penne, using all his willpower to not kick his feet and giggle like a little kid. "I would like that."

Ilya leaned over and bumped Shane with his shoulder, and Shane ducked his head, laughing at himself, at Ilya, at the whole absurd situation. His mind started to wander as they ate in companionable quiet, letting Ilya's music fill the room. He wondered what it might be like if this was their life.

If they weren't the two most closely-watched young hockey players in the world, if they had just *met*, as regular people out in the world — would they have ended up here, together? Would Shane be able to take Ilya home for dinner with his parents and say, *Mom, Dad, this is my boyfriend, Ilya*? There was no way it would be possible, not in this life, not if they wanted to have the careers that were awaiting them. But Shane's heart ached for the possibility of them, the only thing in his life he'd ever really wanted other than to play hockey.

"You are very quiet," Ilya bumped Shane with his shoulder again.

"Oh, sorry, just thinking," Shane said vaguely, finishing his last bite. He stood, carrying their plates to the dishwasher, and Ilya followed.

"Thinking about?" he asked, leaning back against the counter where he had been kissing Shane into oblivion only two hours ago.

Did Shane want to tell Ilya? He didn't want to ruin their night, which had been perfect and so detached from the reality they were ignoring. He kept his back to Ilya when he spoke again.

"Just like… I don't know. I know that nothing about our lives is normal. And being in the NHL is the only thing I've ever wanted, since I can remember wanting anything. I would never give it up. I don't know who I would be if I wasn't a hockey player, if I wasn't *Shane Hollander,* first overall draft pick and future Hall of Famer. You know?"

"Yes," was Ilya's only answer.

He understood, he was the only one who really did.

Steeling himself, Shane turned to face Ilya. His expression was wide open — no walls, no sexy smirk, just Ilya, looking for once as young as he was. Fuck it. Shane was letting it all out.

"So I know I can never have everything I want. If I want this career, I can't have what Hayden has, I can't invite someone over and make out with him in front of my roommate. Because I'm fucking gay, and I've been trying to convince myself I'm not. But Delzy knows it, you obviously know it, I might as well accept it. Accept that I'll never be able to be myself and be *Shane Hollander*. I have to pick one. And it's not fucking fair."

Shane was shocked to realize that there were tears running down his cheeks. In an instant, Ilya's arms were around him and he was crying into his shoulder. Every pent up emotion that he had been holding in, keeping contained, was coming out. The Christmas disaster and that week he thought Ilya hated him, the All-Star game and Marks's homophobic bullshit, all the guys chirping him a little too enthusiastically, and keeping this fucking secret when all he wanted to do was grab Ilya and kiss him every time he scored a goal. All of it.

Ilya rubbed his back and kissed the crown of his head, whispering soothing words in Russian, and it somehow calmed him. Taking a few deep breaths, he pulled back and looked up at the impossibly gorgeous man holding him, the one responsible for making him fall apart, and maybe the only person who could put him back together.

Now that he'd gotten all of that off his chest, embarrassment started to creep in. Ilya had just fucked him and cooked him dinner, and Shane was repaying him by having a breakdown in his kitchen.

“I’m sorry, I totally ruined our nice night.”

“Fuck, Shane, you did not.” Ilya sighed, then a smile played on his lips. “I am sorry I fucked you to tears.”

Shane laughed, sniffling the last of his tears away and thunking his forehead on Ilya’s shoulder.

“Oh shut up, you didn’t fuck me to tears, jesus.”

Ilya stepped back to look at Shane properly, and said, “I understand. I… I do not have all the English words. But I think about this too. If I am bisexual, I cannot be Russian anymore. They will not want me, will not be safe. I cannot… it feels impossible.”

Shane’s heart sank, he had forgotten how much more complicated it all was for Ilya because of Russia. And he knew Ilya loved Russia, he talked about it often, how beautiful it was, despite his tenuous family relationships. But Russia would not love him back if they knew about this.

But Shane had to know. Had to know if Ilya felt the same about him.

Shane spoke, searching Ilya’s face for an answer, “If none of that mattered — Russia, the NHL, fucking society, whatever — would you… would you want to be with me for real? Because that’s what I want. I want *you.*”

Ilya’s face broke, he looked so pained, but he didn’t reply. A long silence stretched between them, and Shane waited. Waited for Ilya to say he wanted him too. But he just stared, and Shane felt like he might throw up.

“Oh…” Shane said. “Okay. That’s okay…”

Shane moved to walk past Ilya to get his shoes, yet again fleeing this kitchen with a broken heart.

But this time, Ilya stopped him. He grabbed Shane’s arm and pulled him back.

“Shane, yes. I want you. I have wanted you since you said hello to me in Russian, first day at training camp. Who is this beautiful Canadian boy learning fucking Russian to say hello to me? No one on earth would do such a thing. But you did it.”

Shane laughed, cheeks warming with the memory of how silly he felt that day, so relieved that Ilya felt the same.

“But like you said, it is impossible. We can only be this,” Ilya gestured between them, “here, alone, just us.”

“So what do we do?” Shane asked. “Just be miserable and hook up in hotel rooms and keep secrets forever?”

“Probably yes. Or stop and try to not think about it.”

“I don’t want that.” Shane wanted to stomp his foot in defiance. “I don’t want to stop, do you?”

“No,” Ilya turned in frustration, walking to the couch and flopping down on his back. Shane followed, standing over him.

“So we keep doing this, keep it a secret?” Shane pleaded, needing Ilya to say yes to that, at least that.

Ilya sat up just enough to grab Shane by the waist and pull him down on top of him. Shane landed with a surprised grunt, grinning.

“Yes. We keep doing, we keep it secret,” Ilya grinned back. “I cannot think too far ahead, I do not know what to do, not about Russia, not about anything. But for now… I want you.”

And Shane kissed him, holding Ilya’s face in his hands. He let go of the future, and decided to hold tightly to the present. They would have their time together, they would keep winning hockey games together, they would get to the playoffs, they would prove themselves, and then… he didn’t know. He didn’t care. All he cared about was Ilya’s body beneath him, Ilya’s tongue sliding into his mouth, Ilya’s hands squeezing his ass.

Shane pulled back, remembering something. If they were being honest, he needed to tell Ilya.

“Oh, but there is one thing. And I’m sorry — and I know to stop saying sorry, but I really am sorry for this — Delzy kind of knows. He knows about me. Being gay, obviously. But he also knows we kissed. Please don’t be mad at me, I freaked out and panicked and asked him for advice. But he was really nice about it, and I swear I haven’t told him anything else. Oh and Delzy is gay too, but *please* don’t tell anyone and especially don’t tell him you know or that I told you.”

Ilya put a finger to Shane's lips to stop the stream of word-vomit flowing from his mouth.

"Shane. Delzy knows we are fucking. I know Delzy is gay. This all is very obvious."

"What!?"

"What, what?"

"How did you know Delzy is gay?" Shane asked in utter shock. "And fuck, did you tell him about us? Have you guys been talking about this?"

"No," Ilya rolled his eyes. "Fuck no, I can… I see. I am noticing things, more than other people. Most people do not notice anything. But I see Delzy, not so hard to see if you are looking."

"Wow, I didn't know until he basically told me. He figured me out pretty quick though."

"I thought Delzy was wanting to fuck *you* for a while," Ilya admitted.

"Oh…" Shane blushed, remembering when he drunkenly thought the same thing on New Year's Eve. "Yeah I thought that too for a minute, I tried to kiss him."

"What?! No!" It was Ilya's turn to be shocked.

"On New Year's Eve. I was wasted and he walked me to the hotel, and I thought he was trying to, you know, do something. And I thought you hated me. So I went for the kiss and he shut me down. It was fucking mortifying."

"Oh, Shane," Ilya laughed and pulled him down for a soft kiss. "I am so sorry you are so terrible at knowing when a person wants to kiss you or not."

"Hey, that's not fair, you thought it too!" Shane sat back, kneeling between Ilya's legs, and trying to stop his laughter. He gazed at Ilya, propped up on his elbows and smirking again, and fell a little harder for him.

"But wait, how does Delzy know about us?" Shane asked, remembering the other part of what Ilya had said. "You haven't talked to him?"

“You are not very… what is the word? Like you cannot pretend. He knew you kissed me, from there is pretty obvious.”

“Fuck, do you think it’s obvious to other guys on the team?”

“No, just Delzy. He knows what he is looking at.”

“Right, yeah, I guess that makes sense. I’ve been trying to avoid being around him one on one, so he couldn’t ask me about it, probably means he knows something.”

Ilya rolled his eyes.

“What?! I was trying to protect you too, you know.”

“Is very sweet then.”

Ilya sat up too, and rearranged them so his head was in Shane’s lap. Shane stroked his hair and felt lighter than he had… maybe ever. It was such a relief to be completely honest with at least *one* person.

“I don’t think we should tell Delzy, though,” Shane said, not really to Ilya, but thinking aloud.

“Why? He does not care.”

“I think he does. I don’t know… He’s had some bad experiences, it’s like he wants to protect me, but this is just totally different.”

Ilya hummed. “Hmm, you *are* Delzy’s favorite boy.”

“Oh god, I bet everyone thinks that.” Shane covered his face with his hands. He appreciated his friendship with Delzy so much, but hoped it wasn’t yet another thing to be judged about.

“Is cute. He is like mama and you are baby duck, following him around.”

“Oh my god,” Shane groaned, flopping his head back onto the couch.

“So should make nice with him.”

“I just… yeah I will. I don’t know what I’ll tell him, but yeah.”

“Whatever you do, is okay with me,” Ilya hummed, turning his head to nuzzle until Shane’s crotch.

Shane moaned, “What are you doing?”

“What do you think?”

Half an hour later, they were back on the couch with the ice cream Ilya convinced Shane to share with him. Shane gave in, saying, “I’m going to make you bag skate with me after practice.” Ilya just rolled his eyes, but Shane was serious.

At around 9pm, Shane texted Hayden: *crashing at ilya’s. have fun with jackie.* He didn’t get a reply, probably a good sign.

They fell asleep tangled up together on the couch, Ilya’s legal procedural show on in the background, then woke in the middle of the night and made their way, kissing sleepily, to the bed, where they collapsed again.

When Shane woke up to his usual 6am alarm, he silenced it and snuggled back under Ilya’s arm. He could skip the routine for one more day.

Chapter End Notes

I would like you all to think about the moment that Ilya opened his door and have this image in your mind.

The kudos and especially the comments give me so much joy and validation, I can't thank you enough!

Chapter 16: Ilya Interlude #8

If you had asked Ilya what he wanted out of the next year of his life the day before he flew to Ottawa to start his NHL career, he would probably have said:

- Score at least 50 goals
- Make it to the Stanley Cup finals
- Be voted rookie of the year
- Buy a Porsche 911

Depending on who had asked, he'd also probably have said: have a lot of sex with a lot of hot women (and some men, but he wouldn't have said that to anyone).

He would not have said fall in love with his future Canadian teammate who he sort of hated because he had beaten him at World Juniors and because he was unbearably attractive in a straight-laced, too-serious, boring kind of way.

But that's where he found himself by February of his rookie year.

Not for nothing, he was going to be closing in on 50 goals soon enough, the Centaurs were looking likely to make it to the playoffs for the first time in a decade, and he had the Porsche 911 and the Cayenne.

But in the last six weeks, he'd only had sex with one person. Shane fucking Hollander. And the worst part was, it was so much better than any sex he'd ever had before. And Ilya had had a LOT of great sex, if he did say so himself. But fucking Shane, everything was hotter, more fun, more intense, just *more*. Ilya was normally so in control, but Shane made him feel untethered.

When he got the text from Shane asking what he was doing, his immediate reply was "nothing." So then he had to scramble to get out of his plans to go out with Lapierre — he wasn't going to take anyone home from the bar or anything like that, but it was their week off and he needed to maintain appearances a least a little. But not when Shane needed somewhere to go and Ilya had a perfectly good apartment, and a perfectly good *bed*, that he was dying to get Shane into.

Ilya would have to thank Hayden and his misguided new girlfriend.

But what was he going to do with Shane? He couldn't just text him back "come over I will fuck you and make you come as many times as I can." That would be implied, but would probably scare Shane away. Ilya smiled, imagining Shane's face if he really did send that text — bright pink, freckles highlighted by his blush, eyes wide with shock.

He was so easily flustered, it was fucking adorable. So yeah, he was going to invite Shane over and he was going to cook for him and he was going to fuck him. But first he had to make him squirm a little.

Ilya rushed to shower, and opted to skip putting on a shirt after. Looking in the mirror, he adjusted his sweatpants so the waistband of his boxers was showing, and gave himself a once over. Yeah, he was definitely hotter than Scott Hunter. Fuck that guy.

He let Shane sweat it out for a few minutes, but couldn't keep his hands off of him for long. After the All-Star weekend, Ilya had given up all pretense of trying to keep his emotional distance. Shane had wrapped himself so tightly around Ilya's heart, it was a miracle his blood was still flowing through his veins.

When he rocked into Shane for the first time, it was like stars exploding inside of him, shockwaves rippling through his entire body. Shane reacted so beautifully, his whimpers and moans seeping into Ilya's pores and heightening the sensation of every slick slide of his cock. He unraveled inside of Shane, lightheaded and nearly forgetting how to speak English. By the time he came hot and hard *inside of Shane Hollander, fucking hell,* he was babbling in Russian, losing English altogether.

So easy for me, you take my cock like no one else, you have ruined me.

Fuck, he was a second away from saying *I love you.*

But the true unraveling happened when Shane started crying in his kitchen, spilling everything that he'd been holding in — everything that Ilya had suspected Shane had been feeling. Ilya felt it too, of course he did.

Shane had looked so small, and in that moment Ilya felt so young, so powerless to do anything but hold this precious human to him. He hated that Shane felt so torn and so lost inside this picture-perfect life they were living. Shane, who skated like he owned the ice and made plays and scored goals against the best hockey players in the world like it was easy. He had every confidence on the ice, but off of it — he was a lost puppy who didn't know where to go.

Ilya *was* powerless, but he could hold Shane, give him somewhere to go. He could let him cry and tell him he understood and try to make him smile and laugh. He'd almost let Shane walk out when he asked Ilya if he wanted to be together if they could, almost let Shane's heart break again in some twisted attempt to protect them both — but he couldn't do it. They had gone too far, and now he needed Shane, he couldn't live without him.

Everything was so much more complicated than it felt when he signed his contract. He was certain that they were headed for disaster, but as he held a crying Shane in his arms, rubbing his back and whispering comforting words, Ilya had never been more certain that Shane was worth it.

The two of them were alone — placed on this precarious pedestal by the hockey world, unsteady and trying to find their footing, with everyone watching and waiting for them to fall. They were alone up there, but at least they were together. And if they fell, they'd fall together.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> insert obligatory "sorry it took so long to update" apology here. ready for some angst? yearning? dumb boys being dumb?
>
> sooooo many thanks to Nico, Paupy, and dntat. again, i beg you, read their stuff, it's so good.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shane and Ilya settled into a surprisingly easy routine for the rest of the regular season. Hayden and Jackie got very serious very fast — she essentially become a third roommate, staying at their apartment whenever they were home. Shane liked her, he really did, and he liked it even more that she kept Hayden distracted enough that he didn't really question why Shane was spending so many nights at Ilya's. Not every night, but between road trips and their sleepovers during home stretches, Shane was spending more than half of his nights with Ilya.

Ilya continued to go out to bars and clubs with Lapierre and the other guys, even dragging Shane along sometimes. But Shane hated seeing girls flirting with Ilya — and hated seeing Ilya play along and flirt and dance even more. He knew why Ilya did it, he didn't want anyone to be suspicious, and Ilya never took the girls home. But that didn't make it feel any better.

The word "boyfriend" flitted around Shane's mind like a bug trapped under a jar, demanding attention and to be let free. But he wouldn't utter the word. They weren't officially anything. Just exclusively sleeping with each other and spending at least 80% of their time together. That's all, no big deal.

Delzy had eventually cornered Shane and sat him down for a talk about how he had to be careful — careful about getting caught, and careful not to get his heart broken.

Don't make the same mistakes I did. That's what he said.

And Shane *did* appreciate Delzy looking out for him. He took his advice when it came to keeping everything locked down and not doing anything in public that might give them away. But when it came to Shane's heart, that was already long gone. It had probably been gone when Ilya told Shane to call him by his first name all those

months ago. And Shane accepted his doomed fate, but Delzy didn't need to know that.

The Centaurs had clinched a spot in the first round of the playoffs, and things were pretty much exactly how Shane had hoped at the start of the season. Ilya had 63 goals and 47 assists, Shane had 49 goals and 62 assists. It was really a toss-up between them of who would win the Calder trophy for Rookie of the Year, but Shane was sure Ilya would win. Goals were always more impressive and important than assists, Shane expected. Either way, they both had record-breaking seasons for the Centaurs, the fans *loved* them, and it was just the beginning of their careers.

So Shane went into the first round of the playoffs against Montreal feeling invincible and ready to prove to the world that the Centaurs weren't to be overlooked — and that he was living up to the hype. Montreal was also in a rebuild era, but had a few more years of development than Ottawa did, and everyone was predicting the Voyageurs would sweep the Centaurs. But Shane wouldn't let that happen.

Practice took over Shane and Ilya's lives — they were pushing themselves harder than ever, and some nights they spent together they didn't do anything more than rest their sore bodies, make out, and fall asleep tangled up in each other. It was more than Shane could have dreamed for, really.

The work was paying off, too. They'd pushed Montreal to a game six in Ottawa after losing three games and winning two, and even though Jackie wasn't staying over at their place, Shane kind of needed to be with Ilya the night before that game. He told Hayden he was spending the night with his parents, for some kind of good luck thing — Hayden didn't question it, hockey players were doing much weirder things to try to gain even the smallest cosmic advantage in the playoffs.

Despite their aching muscles and sore bones, and the fact that they had to play another grueling game the next day, they couldn't keep their hands off each other. Shane knew his high-strung energy was getting to Ilya, who kept placing a firm hand on Shane's shaking leg while they sat on Ilya's couch watching the Boston vs. New Jersey game.

Eventually, he settled Shane's nerves with a long, slow, *torturously* good blowjob that left him completely sated and still, and Shane fell

asleep only a few short minutes later. Shane returned the favor in the shower in the morning, and they both walked into the dressing room for their early-afternoon game feeling rejuvenated and ready to fight for a game seven.

“The rookies are looking too chipper today — why the hell are you two so happy?” asked Clarkson, one of the D-men, side-eyeing Shane and Ilya. He was looking pretty bruised and battered himself.

“Uh…” Shane stuttered, caught off guard by the question. “Just ready to beat the Voyageurs. We’re ready to take them to game seven.”

“Damn right,” Clarkson knocked Shane on the shoulder and returned to taping his stick.

By the time they made it back to the dressing room after three brutal periods and eking by with a 2-1 win, Clarkson was looking as happy as Ilya did after coming down Shane’s throat that morning. He walked up between Shane and Ilya, all three of them in various stages of undress and drenched in sweat, and threw his arms over their shoulders.

“Buds, whatever was in your orange juice this morning, let’s do it again before game seven, eh? I need those smiles from this morning back on your faces in Montreal!”

Ilya looked at Shane with the most self-satisfied smirk Shane had ever seen and said, “You are right. Shane, we must have same orange juice in Montreal. You can bring some, yes?”

Shane went beet red and glared at Ilya, but choked out a reply. “Yep, of course. Great game Clarky.”

Clarkson patted them on the backs again and went back to his stall to finish undressing.

“Get that look off of your face,” Shane grumbled out of the side of his mouth to Ilya.

“I am thinking of my favorite orange juice, it makes me smile, Hollander,” Ilya said with a wink, then dropped his boxer briefs and sauntered to the showers.

Shane leaned forward and bonked his head against the wall of his stall, annoyed but also grinning like an idiot in a way no one else needed to see.

While they walked down a hall towards the players exit, Shane turned to Ilya and asked, “So, uh, do you have plans tonight?”

Shane wondered if he could get away with another night in Ilya’s bed. Ilya knew what he was really asking, but to Shane’s complete surprise, Ilya said, “Ah. Yes.”

“You do?” Shane replied, eyes wide. He knew there was a pretty strict unwritten rule: don’t party until we win the cup (or lose and need to drown our sorrows). So he didn’t expect the guys to be going out.

Ilya swallowed hard — he rarely if ever looked this uncomfortable, and it was jarring to see the pained look on his face now.

“I have, ah, dinner. With —” Ilya was cut off by a *beautiful* girl running down the hall toward them.

“Ilya!” She yelled with a slight Russian accent, jumping into his arms. She was much smaller than Ilya, and Shane for that matter, and Ilya easily lifted her into his arms and she smacked a loud kiss on his mouth. When Ilya set her down, his hands lingered on her waist, and he smiled down at her brightly.

The girl began chattering excitedly in rapid Russian, and Ilya had the kind of happy, open look on his face that Shane usually only saw when they were alone together.

Who was this? Why hadn’t Ilya mentioned her? Why were his hands still on her hips? How did she even get back here?

Shane was beginning to freak out as he stood there awkwardly listening to the two of them chattering in Russian. He took a step back, ready to run away and panic in the comfort of his car, when they finally turned to him.

“Shane this is Svetlana,” Ilya said, a giant grin on his face. “Svetlana, this is —”

“I know who Shane Hollander is, you idiot!” She smacked Ilya’s side. “Hello, Shane, it’s a pleasure to meet the soon to be Calder trophy winner.”

“What?!” Ilya looked genuinely offended. If he wasn’t so confused, Shane would have found it funny. Who the hell was this person?

“Um… hi?” Shane said to — apparently — Svetlana.

“Svetlana Vetrova.” She stuck out her perfectly-manicured hand to shake Shane’s. “Ilya has not told you about me? Why am I not surprised? We are friends from childhood.”

“No… he hasn’t,” Shane said slowly as his heart rate started to even out. He absently shook her hand. It was small but her grip was firm. Then something sparked his memory. “Wait, Vetrova? Are you Sergei Vetrov’s daughter?”

“Yes!” Svetlana’s eyes brightened and a wide, genuine smile spread across her delicate features. “Ilya, I like him more than you already.”

Ilya huffed and folded his arms.

“So, *how* do you know each other?” Shane really needed more answers and less banter from these two.

“When I was young, we would spend summers in Moscow. Ilya skated at the same club as my father, we became friends. Well…” she smirked and leaned in conspiratorially, “more than friends.”

Shane blanched and hoped he didn’t *actually* flinch.

“But that was never going to work out,” Svetlana continued, waving a hand dismissively. “We eventually stopped returning to Moscow, stayed in Boston full-time. I’ve been trying to catch Ilya for a visit, but he keeps avoiding me. So I decided to say fuck it and fly to Ottawa!’

“Oh,” was all Shane could say. It was a lot of information to take in. But it sounded like Ilya was *not* romantically involved with Svetlana, so that was a relief. Although he still felt the sting of jealousy knowing they once had been, and she flew all the way here just to see Ilya.

Shane finally made eye contact with Ilya, who gave him an apologetic look and a small shrug. Even though whatever was going on with Svetlana wasn’t romantic, Shane was still hurt that Ilya hadn’t said anything at all about her.

In fact, Shane realized he knew very little about Ilya, his childhood, his life in Russia outside of hockey — none of it. Shane shared so much of himself with Ilya, invited him to the house he grew up in, told him about his insecurities and fears and struggles. And Ilya, especially in these last few months, offered Shane camaraderie and humor and sex, and all of it was wonderful. But it dawned on him that Ilya almost never reciprocated sharing his own memories or feelings. Shane was instantly embarrassed. But he was being impolite.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you, Svetlana,” Shane plastered on his media face and looked into her soft blue eyes. “I’m a big fan of your dad — even though he played for Boston. And it’s great to meet a friend of Ilya’s. I hope you have a nice evening.”

Shane turned to leave without looking at Ilya again, afraid he’d reveal the hurt that was beginning to fester in his gut.

“Shane!” Ilya called after him. “Will text you!”

Shane turned back, his professional smile still pulling tightly against his cheeks, “No worries, I’ll see you on the plane!”

“Okay…” Ilya’s voice faded and Shane walked quickly towards the exit and his car, leaving Ilya and Svetlana to whatever they were doing.

What felt like less than a minute later, Shane was surprised to find himself in the parking garage at his apartment building. He’d been so lost in thought, he didn’t even remember driving.

He was wracking his memory for details about Ilya’s life. There was that one time Ilya had told Shane about his dad and brother being terrible, and that his mother had died, but that was pretty much it.

Ilya did talk about his ambitions and frustrations with hockey, but those were things he’d share with any teammate. Honestly, he’d tell anyone who asked that he was going to win ten Stanley Cups and beat every goal record in existence. And he’d tell the media how much he disliked any opponent, without shame or apology.

This whole friendship, relationship, whatever it was, suddenly felt so lopsided. Shane was open and vulnerable, and what did Ilya offer in response? A kiss and blowjob? For the first time, that didn’t feel like enough for Shane. He wanted to *know* Ilya, really know him as a person. For a few weeks now, Shane had been thinking some truly crazy things. Like maybe he was actually genuinely in love with Ilya. But how could he love someone he knew so little about?

The certainty he thought he felt about Ilya was starting to unravel, and the fear that Ilya was just using him for sex and comfort during the season clawed its way out of that festering feeling in his gut and lodged itself in his throat. Shane was perilously close to crying. He needed to get his shit together and get out of his damn car.

He looked at his phone and saw a text from Hayden saying he was

spending the night at Jackie's. Perfect. Shane could go upstairs and collapse into bed, sleep, and ignore the sadness creeping up on him. He had to focus, they had a game seven to win. There was no time for sadness, not now.

Ilya did text Shane that night, but Shane was already asleep. When he woke up, he saw the notification on his screen.

Ilya: sorry about that

Shane didn't know what to say to that. What was Ilya sorry about? Not telling him about his plans with Svetlana? Not telling him that Svetlana even existed?

Shane sighed, and replied.

Shane: i was asleep. can we talk tonight?

Ilya replied immediately with a simple "yes."

There was a palpable tension between them on the flight to Montreal, but fortunately it was an extremely short flight. They went straight to practice from the airport, so they really had no chance to talk until they were in their hotel room that night.

Shane played like shit in practice, and their coach pulled him aside in the hall before they reached the dressing room.

"Everything okay, Hollander? If you're sick or hurt, I need you to tell me now."

"No, sir. I'm fine, just tired nerves. I'll be good for the game. Sorry about today."

"Don't be a hero Hollander — we might be able to beat Montreal without you, but definitely not Boston. If you're hurt and need to rest…"

"No, I swear. It's just nerves. I'm ready to play."

"All right then, hit the showers. And get your head right before tomorrow."

Getting a talking to from the coach was *not* how he wanted this practice to end, and Shane was mortified. He needed to talk to Ilya if he was going to be able to focus during the game, but what the hell was he even going to say?

The team had a catered dinner together in a hotel meeting room after practice, and Shane sandwiched himself between Hayden and Delzy to avoid talking to Ilya. He wasn't sure he'd be able to talk to Ilya without either lashing out or breaking down — or both. It had to wait until they were alone.

The whole day, he'd been spiraling. Shane wanted to grab Ilya and beg him to talk to him, beg him to tell him everything about his life and his heart. Being a friend, teammate, and fuck-buddy wasn't enough. Months ago, Shane had told himself he'd take whatever he could get and be happy with it, but he just couldn't anymore. He wanted to have *all* of Ilya. But he was terrified that Ilya would never give that to him, that if he asked, Ilya would back so far off that Shane would never be able to reach him again.

Shane lingered in the hotel lobby with Hayden, reminded of that awful week back in December when he and Ilya were avoiding each other like the plague. It hurt, being back in this position. Shane needed to be brave and just talk to Ilya.

When he finally walked into the hotel room, Ilya instantly jumped off the bed and strode towards Shane. He took Shane's face in his hands, and before Shane could do or say anything, Ilya was kissing him, swiping his tongue into Shane's mouth and making Shane moan helplessly. Shane wanted to let everything go and give in, but he was determined to talk and not let Ilya brush it aside with seduction. Not this time.

He pushed Ilya back by the shoulders and breathed, "Wait. Ilya, wait."

Ilya immediately backed off. His lips were already swollen, and his eyes were hungry and a little scared.

"Shane, I am sorry. I should have told you about Svetlana." He reached for Shane's hand as he spoke, and Shane's resolve weakened a little. He sighed.

"Can we sit? And talk?" Shane asked, using the hand Ilya was holding to pull him towards the bed.

They sat on the edge of the bed, facing each other.

"Shane…" Ilya started, but Shane interrupted him.

"It's more than Svetlana," Shane began. Ilya looked confused, and Shane felt a kindling of frustration light inside him. Why couldn't Ilya

just *know* what was wrong like he always did?

“I feel like I don’t know you,” Shane said, almost pleadingly. “Like, you have never shared anything about your life before being drafted.”

“Oh,” Ilya scoffed. “Why do you want to know that? Is boring, stupid. My life is nothing.”

“Your life isn’t nothing, what the fuck? I didn’t even know about one of your closest friends, but you know, like, everything about me.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, which made Shane’s frustration flare.

“Don’t roll your eyes!” Shane stood and faced Ilya. “This is important to me.”

“I do not know why.” Ilya wouldn’t make eye contact with Shane, and it scared him.

“Because, I care about you!” Shane’s voice was rising, and he needed to keep it down. “I care about your life.”

“Okay, so, you met Svetlana. She is my old friend. We used to hook up before she moved to US all year. I skated with her father sometimes. That good?”

“I don’t know, not really. What was your favorite subject in school? What did you do other than hockey growing up? What is your family like?”

Ilya stood now, anger flaring in his eyes.

“Already I told you about my stupid brother and terrible father. And my mother… what more is there to tell? Stop this, Shane.”

Shane folded his arms defensively, but stood his ground.

“I don’t understand why you won’t tell me things about yourself, Ilya.”

“Is none of your business. Why do you need to know these things?” Ilya threw his arms up in frustration and began pacing in front of the bed.

“Because I *want* to know you. I want to understand you the way you understand me! Because I —” Shane cut himself off abruptly. He had almost said *because I love you.* It was on the tip of his tongue all the

time, but he'd never let it slip out.

Ilya stopped his pacing and looked back at Shane.

"Shane," Ilya walked towards him, stopping only inches away from him and gently placing a hand on Shane's cheek. "You do understand me. More than anyone else."

"I do?" Shane didn't get it, but the warm look in Ilya's eyes made him believe it.

"Yes," Ilya said, and leaned down to kiss Shane so sweetly his knees almost buckled.

"But…" Shane persisted with his argument when they separated, but Ilya claimed his mouth again, with more heat this time, and Shane whimpered into the kiss, giving up the fight.

They fell into bed, and when they were both naked and flushed and sated, Ilya pulled Shane tight against him and fell asleep almost immediately. Shane lay there, comfortable and warm in his arms, but his mind wouldn't calm down.

"Is none of your business." That's what Ilya said. And nothing that happened after that could ease the sharp sting of those words. Shane had begged Ilya to open up to him, and Ilya couldn't have made it more clear that he didn't trust Shane enough to let him in. Shane believed it when Ilya said Shane understood him more than anyone else — but that wasn't enough.

He wanted to shake Ilya awake and continue their argument, to beg and plead with Ilya to share more of himself. But he also wanted to shove Ilya out of the bed, protect the soft vulnerable parts of himself that he'd revealed to this man who wouldn't reciprocate.

But Shane did neither. Because he was weak and he needed the comforting press of Ilya's body against his, the soft rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. Despite his anger and disappointment, he still needed Ilya. This was probably exactly what Delzy had been warning him about. Fuck.

Tomorrow they had a day off — which wouldn't be all that restful, with practice and watching game tape and physical therapy. Shane really needed to focus. He told himself to just let it go. He had plenty of time to figure out this shit with Ilya. But he only had one more game between moving closer to the finals or going home. That's what

mattered most. Shane eventually fell into restless sleep, both consoled and set on edge by Ilya's presence.

Everything was pretty normal between them the next day, and Shane was able to set aside his worries to focus on getting ready for game seven. And because he wasn't one to mess with superstitions, he wasn't going to *not* repeat the morning blowjob from before game six. Shane even insisted that Ilya's had to be in the shower to most closely replicate the previous game. But Shane's focus was not where it needed to be when they arrived at the arena.

He pushed hard through the first and second periods, getting a ton of shots on goal but *nothing* would get past Montreal's goaltender, and Shane's patience with himself was wearing thin.

Finally, on a powerplay in the third period, when Shane's muscles were almost numb from overuse and they were down 5-3, Shane managed to shake something loose. He, Ilya, and Delzy were playing keep away with the puck, maneuvering around Montreal's penalty kill line, desperate for any opportunity to shoot as the penalty clock ticked down.

Shane shot the puck around the boards to Ilya, then bolted over to the net, hoping Ilya knew what he was trying to do — and he did. Ilya caught the puck and pushed off on a Montreal defender, then shot the puck cleanly through the crease, between their goalie and D-man. Without hesitation, Shane swung back his stick in anticipation, and as soon as the puck was in position, he smacked it between the goalie's leg pad and glove right into the net.

Delzy, Ilya, and the rest of their line descended on him, engulfing Shane in a giant hug and shouting.

"Fuck yeah!"

"Hollander you beast!"

"That's my rookie, baby!"

Ilya was right in the middle of the huddle, arms around Shane, and Shane hated how good it felt. Ilya touched his helmeted forehead to Shane's and said, quiet enough that only Shane could hear him, "Beautiful, Hollander."

Shane let out a deep exhale. In that moment, he wanted to let it all go, all his fears and disappointments from his argument with Ilya. And all

the noise around them and the secrets and worries about being found out. He wanted to rip Ilya's helmet off and kiss him hard on the mouth, then shove him away and tell him he couldn't get all of Shane without giving something more of himself, and then pull him back and beg him to never let go.

But he didn't do any of that. He simply replied, "Get us another goal, Rozanov."

A few minutes later, Shane watched as Ilya took a pass and went off on an unbelievable breakaway, swerving around defensemen, not a single player on the ice able to catch up with him. Shane held his breath while the rest of the bench yelled and urged Ilya on.

Come on come on come on, fucking do it Ilya.

And he fucking did. Ilya did his signature move, faking the backhand and going for the forehand, knocking the puck cleanly over the goalie's shoulder. The bench went crazy, all jumping up and cheering, banging their sticks on the boards, and Ilya's linemates swarmed him on the ice. Shane's heart swelled with pride as he threw his arms around Hayden and jumped up and down with the entire team. They tied the game, they could actually win this thing.

But no matter how hard they tried, neither team could get another goal. And after 60 grueling minutes, they were going into overtime. The Centaurs marched determinedly back to the dressing room at the end of regulation, steeling themselves for another round.

Delzy stood at the center of the room as the rest of the team sat in their stalls, some refueling with sports drinks and carbs, some holding their heads in their hands or praying, some of them even choking back mustard packets to prevent cramping. Shane just looked to Delzy, their captain, desperate to hear his words of wisdom.

Shane had been asked by a reporter months ago if he thought their team — mostly young players and a few seasoned veterans — was experienced enough to handle the playoffs, and he thought they'd done a damn good job of proving that they could. But he knew that if they lost this game, the media narrative would be that Shane and Ilya were too green and that Delzy and Eggy were too old for the team to go all the way. He fucking hated it, for himself and Ilya, and for his mentor. They were a *great* team, and they could win this game, Shane had to believe they could.

With a nod from their coach, who looked too worked up to speak,

Delzy called for everyone's attention.

"Hey! Everyone shut up and listen to me. I know you're tired. I'm fucking exhausted. But I know you want to win more than you want to rest, right?"

The team shouted "right!" in booming unison.

"Everyone out there is doubting us — the fucking Montreal fans, the media, fucking all of Canada. None of them thought we'd get this far, but here we are. I've been fighting to get here my whole career, and it's thanks to *you guys* that I'm even here. Every single guy in this room has it in him to get us this win. We have our plays down, we have the drive, we have the passion, we have the fucking skills. We have to fucking dig deep, but we can fucking do this."

Another cheer from the team. Delzy looked directly at Shane when he spoke again.

"All the expectations, all the cynics — forget them. Be in the moment." Shane nodded, closed his eyes, and tried to absorb those words and let them sink into his aching body to give him the energy to keep going.

"This is what we've worked for all season, let's fucking take it!"

The dressing room exploded with a roar from each and every Centaur. Shane made eye contact with Ilya across the room and scrunched his face in determination. Ilya nodded at him, equally determined.

But despite their renewed energy and Delzy's rousing speech, the Centaurs just could not keep up with the Voyageurs. Three minutes into overtime, their star forward eked in a dirty goal — but a goal nonetheless. And that was it. Montreal would advance and Ottawa's season was over.

Shane watched as the whole Montreal bench emptied onto the ice, descending on their teammate who had scored the game winning goal. The roar of the crowd was so loud, Shane thought his ears would be ringing for days. But it was nothing compared to the voice in his head telling him he was a failure. He'd done exactly what he'd been telling himself not to do — he let his situation with Ilya get in the way of hockey, steal his attention, and leave him coming up short.

His parents were in the crowd, watching him fail, surrounded by cheering fans who had prayed on his downfall. Shane couldn't

imagine being more of a disappointment than he was right now. And he still had to wait to shake the fucking hands of the triumphant Voyaguers, who got to keep going toward Shane's dream. What a cruel joke, making them shake hands, rubbing salt in the wound. But Shane would suck it up, he was a professional, he was an adult. Sportsmanship was important, or what the fuck ever.

It was at least comforting that the rest of the Centaurs looked as devastated as Shane felt. Shane's heart broke for Delzy, who was in the playoffs for the first time in seven years and had never made it past the first round. It broke for the guys on the team who had *never* been to the playoffs before. It broke for Ilya, who was so sure they could go all the way this year. It broke for the Ottawa fans who had been so good to Shane in his first year in the NHL.

They got through the excruciating handshake line and left the ice, heads-down. Ilya was leading the way, anger and frustration painted across his face. Behind him, Shane threw an arm around Hayden, who looked like he might cry, and they walked down the tunnel together.

"This is just the beginning, Hayd," Shane knocked their helmets together as he said it, trying to cheer himself up as much as Hayden.

"We'll get 'em next year, right?" Hayden replied.

"Right," Shane sighed.

The room was quiet while they all undressed and showered, the silence eerie as the sounds of celebrations in the arena boomed around them. In a moment of weakness, knowing no one would be paying much attention, Shane went over to stand next to Ilya, craving his touch and too defeated and exhausted to resist. Without looking at him, Shane inched to the right so that his side was lightly pressed up against Ilya's. He exhaled slowly at the grounding press of arm against arm, hip against hip. Ilya swayed ever so slightly into Shane, and with that small gesture, the tears crawling up Shane's throat to his tired eyes threatened to escape. Neither of them said anything, but Shane stayed close to Ilya the rest of the night.

On the bus to the airport, squished between Ilya and the window just as he wanted to be, Shane checked his phone and saw a text from his mom that brought the tears back to his eyes, but he held them back again.

Mom: We love you and we're proud of you, never forget that.

Shane: thanks mom. tell dad thanks 2. love u. talk 2morrow

Mom: Take all the time you need, sweetie.

Shane's parents were too good, he didn't deserve them. He thought about Ilya's family, what little he knew of them, and his heart ached. With sympathy, and a bite of bitterness, too.

The plane ride was the same, Shane wedged between the window and Ilya. He'd considered sitting with Hayden, but he had his headphones on and was rapidly texting, probably Jackie. Shane absently thought about how they weren't supposed to text while the plane was in the air, but couldn't bring himself to care right then.

Instead, he leaned his head on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya tilted his head onto Shane's. And they just breathed together, letting the disappointment sink into their bones.

***

Uncharacteristically, Shane slept late the next morning. He didn't need to get up and run. His entire body hurt, and his heart hurt even more. He didn't want to be seen by anyone — not his neighbors, not people on the street, not other runners on the trail he usually ran — who all knew he was a failure, most of whom had probably witnessed their epic defeat last night on national television. He didn't want to interact with Hayden or Jackie, who had been here waiting for them when they got home.

So, even after finally waking up at 10am, Shane stayed in bed wallowing until about noon, when he got so hungry he couldn't stand it anymore. He dragged himself into the shower, and finally emerged to find not only Hayden and Jackie, but also Delzy sitting in his living room.

That was a first, their captain had never been to their apartment before. And Shane was momentarily terrified that he was in trouble. But what could he possibly be in trouble for? The season was over, they'd lost. So what the hell was this?

"There he is," Hayden leaned his head back on the couch to look at Shane. He had an arm around Jackie who was half in his lap, and was smiling upside-down at him. Shane felt like he'd been hit by a bus, physically and emotionally. Hayden looked like his usual happy self. It was kind of fucked up, Shane thought, for Hayden to be so blasé about this.

“Hey guys. What’s up Delzy?” Shane asked suspiciously.

“Have you eaten?” Delzy stood while he spoke.

“No… I was going to…” Shane gestured to the kitchen.

“How about we go get some food and leave Hayden and Jackie to catch up?” Delzy asked.

“I mean, Jackie was here last night,” Shane hedged.

“Hollander,” Delzy sighed. “Get fucking lunch with me.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but gave in. “Fine.”

He slipped on his sneakers and grabbed his phone and wallet, pulling the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. It wasn’t even that cold out, but Shane needed the emotional protection it offered. Climbing into Delzy’s Land Rover, Shane turned to his captain expectantly.

“So, what’s going on?” Shane asked, a little impatient now.

“Can’t a guy want some company for lunch?” Delzy asked with a nonchalant shrug as he drove.

“No. He can’t. Not when we’ve literally never just gone out to lunch together before, and when you could have invited Hayden too.” Shane wasn’t in the mood for bullshit.

“Damn, kid. Okay,” Delzy huffed. “It looked like you took the loss pretty hard. Fuck, I took it pretty hard too. So maybe I wanted some company to commiserate. And most of the other guys have their wives and girlfriends. And we obviously don’t. So.”

Delzy shrugged, and Shane felt bad for his shitty attitude.

“Oh. Okay.”

They drove in silence until a thought entered Shane’s mind.

“What about Ilya? Why didn’t you invite him, or like, Lapierre?”

Delzy looked at Shane with a raised eyebrow that said, “Really?”

“Fine, just Ilya then.”

“Do you want to call him and see if he wants to join us?” Delzy asked

skeptically.

“Whatever, shut up.”

“That’s what I thought. We clearly have some shit to talk about.”

“I’m not talking about that, especially not in a restaurant.”

“What restaurant?”

It was then that Shane realized they were on the route to Delzy’s needlessly huge house in a gated community. Apparently he’d ordered them a giant pizza, which was delivered only minutes after they arrived. Once they were settled with their food on plates, standing at the kitchen island, Delzy brought Ilya up again.

“So what the fuck is going on with you and Rozanov now?”

“Can’t we talk about anything else? Don’t you want to talk about the game yesterday?”

“We’ll have plenty of time to dissect that shitshow tomorrow and the day after and probably every day for a month. Let’s give ourselves at least one day to forget about it.”

“Fine. But I’m still not talking about Ilya.”

“You are. Because I’m making you, Hollander. It’s a good thing the rest of our team is fucking stupid and doesn’t pay any attention, because it’s pretty obvious something happened between you again, and it wasn’t good.”

Shane sighed and set his plate on the counter.

“Do you have beer? This ginger ale isn’t going to cut it if you’re making me talk about this.”

Delzy grinned and chuckled, “Let’s do it, bud.”

After Shane had eaten another slice of pizza and drank half his beer, he finally started talking.

“I think I’m in love with him.” Shane stated plainly. Because, at this point, why lie?

“Well that much is obvious.”

“Shut the fuck up, no it’s not,” Shane insisted.

“It kinda is, sorry kid. But keep going.”

“Fuck you. So yeah. I think I'm in love. Whatever. But after we won game six, this girl showed up hugging and kissing him back by the player entrance.”

“What the fuck?” Delzy interrupted.

“I know right? He’s bi. That’s not important. The thing is, she was his childhood friend, maybe his ex-girlfriend, who lives in Boston now. Actually, this is kind of cool,” Shane took a swig of his beer. “She’s Sergei Vetrov’s daughter.”

“No way.”

“Yeah. Crazy, right?”

Now that Shane had gotten started, it all came spilling out. Meeting Svetlana, Shane’s realization that he knew so little about Ilya. Their argument and how hurt Shane was by all of it. Shane’s inability to stay away from Ilya despite all of that.

“So I’m kind of where I was before, but I feel like this fog has lifted and now I can’t ignore that I want more, but I have to.” He finished with a big sigh.

“You want my advice?” Delzy asked.

“Not really,” Shane said honestly.

“Well, you’re getting it. Shane, you know this is only going to lead to you getting even more hurt, right?”

“Not if I know that it’s hurting me!”

“That makes no fucking sense.”

“I know, but if I don’t have expectations, then it won’t matter.”

“You think you don’t have expectations, but you *do.*” Delzy set a strong hand on Shane’s shoulder. “You played your ass off last night, and that goal was a beauty. But I could tell you were struggling, and if this shit with Roz is impacting your game, that’s not good. If you don’t distance yourself now and give yourself time to recover this summer, it’s only going to be worse in the long run.”

“No, fuck that. You don’t know that.” He shrugged Delzy’s hand off his shoulder. Shane was getting angry. Who was Delzy to tell him what he was feeling? And sure, he let the whole thing with Ilya get into his head for the game, but he’d get that under control by next season.

“I’m just trying to be helpful, as someone with a lot more life experience, kid.”

“No!” Shane stepped back. “Stop calling me kid. I’m an adult, I can make my own decisions, and this is fucking stupid. I know what I’m doing, Delzy. I’ll take what I can get, and that’ll be enough. And I’ll know if I need to break it off, but I don’t yet.”

Shane was breathing hard, anger rising in his chest and pulsing through his veins. He knew he was being irrational and immature, but he couldn’t stop. Delzy was trying to take away the only person who understood him, the only person who wanted him for *him*, not for his skill or proximity to fame and success and money. After losing that game and getting knocked out of the playoffs, Shane was more certain than ever that he *needed* Ilya. He didn’t care anymore if Ilya didn’t reciprocate, Shane would take what he could get, whether he would open up to Shane or not.

Delzy stepped closer. He towered over Shane in a way that made Shane feel tiny and very much the kid he claimed not to be.

“Listen. I’m just trying to be a friend,” Delzy took a deep breath. “But you’re right, you're an adult and you can do what you want. I’m only your captain on the ice, I can’t tell you what to do off of it.”

Shane deflated.

“I’m sorry, Delzy. I know I fucked up in the game yesterday, and I promise I won’t let this interfere with how I play next season. I’m really going to work on that. But I can’t… I need him.”

It was pathetic and kind of embarrassing to admit, but what did Shane have to lose at this point?

Delzy wrapped him up in a bear hug and Shane went limp — the emotions of the last 48 hours overwhelming him again.

“Like I said, I can’t tell you what to do. You know what I think, so we can drop it and finish this damn pizza.”

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Delzy dropped Shane back at home, but instead of taking the elevator to his apartment, he pulled out his phone and immediately texted Ilya while walking to his car in the garage.

Shane: this fucking sucks

Ilya: yes

Shane: what are u doing rn?

Ilya: no gnsthink

Shane: ??

Ilya: no thing

Ilya: vodka

Shane: want company?

Ilya: ye

Twenty minutes later, Ilya opened the door in a torn up old t-shirt that was ripped at the collar, which was annoyingly sexy. Shane walked in without saying anything and shoved a giant McDonald's bag into Ilya's hands.

"You're drunk," Shane said flatly, sitting down next to Ilya, who was rifling through the bag and arranging the ridiculous amount of food on the coffee table.

"Da. How you know?" Ilya slurred a little, his English not holding up under the circumstances.

"Your texts were almost incomprehensible."

"In-com…what? What this word Hollander?" Ilya looked at Shane with annoyance, like he was offended that Shane used a word he didn't know.

"It means they were a mess," Shane laughed.

"Oh." Ilya took a giant bite that was basically half of a big mac, and shrugged.

Shane just watched as he devoured the burger, feeling the dark cloud that was hovering over his head since last night start to dissipate.

“You doing okay?” Shane asked.

“Pfft,” was Ilya’s reply around a mouthful of fries.

“That sounds like a no.”

“Is not no. Fuck off.” Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m not doing great either. I slept til 10 this morning.”

Ilya nearly choked on another bite of fries, looking at Shane with big eyes.

“Early worm Shane Hollander not up at dawn? This is very bad.” Ilya smirked at him, his eyes a little glassy, but amused.

“You mean early *bird?*” Shane laughed, chasing that cloud a little farther away.

“Stupid English, I do not know,” Ilya scoffed, and flopped back on the couch, letting his head loll.

“But yeah. It was bad.” Shane sighed, matching Ilya’s position, both of them turning their heads to look at each other.

“Am bad too. Fuck Montreal.” Ilya signed.

“Yeah,” Shane agreed. “Fuck Montreal.”

“I… want to win. Like the most. To lose. I hate it.”

Shane chuckled darkly, “I hate it too. We should have won that one. I feel like it’s my fault.”

“What? No…” Ilya trailed off, eyes closing.

“I don’t know, after we argued the other night, I felt off,” Shane admitted. It was easier to say when Ilya wasn’t looking at him.

“Me too. Off. Want… fuck,” Ilya sighed. “Shane, want you not to be sad.”

“Really?” Shane lifted his head and stared at Ilya, whose eyes were still closed, head tilted back.

“Da.”

Ilya took a swig of the glass of vodka that had been left untouched while he ate, and Shane wondered if he should take it away. But Ilya kept talking.

“Am not good enough for Shane Hollander.”

“What the fuck, Ilya, yes you are!” Shane insisted, turning to fully face the drunken man who looked near tears next to him.

“No. Am terrible. Awful guy. The worst.” Ilya stood and started walking, a little wobbly, away from Shane towards his bedroom. Shane followed, wrapping an arm behind Ilya’s back to steady him.

“You’re just drunk, Ilya,” Shane soothed. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Shane was freaked out to see Ilya like this. He’d only seen a Ilya happy or horny version of drunk-Ilya, never this self-deprecating, almost pathetic version of him. It was throwing Shane off, and he didn’t really know what to do.

“Yes, Hollander. Am saying. You said. Cannot tell you bad things. You cannot see.”

“Um, let’s get you to bed, okay, Ilya?” Shane had no idea what to say. He wasn’t sure exactly what Ilya was talking about, but regardless, he was afraid that Ilya would regret everything he was saying right now when he sobered up.

“Pshhh, not tired,” Ilya turned in Shane’s grasp and threw his arms over Shane’s shoulders. “Wanna fuck you, Hollander.”

Shane’s cheeks burned. He wanted that too, but not when Ilya was like this.

“How about you take a nap, and we can talk about that later.”

Ilya ignored him, and instead leaned in to kiss him, but Shane dodged it. Ilya’s breath reeked of vodka, and Shane tried not to grimace.

“Come on, let’s get into bed,” Shane urged them towards the bedroom.

“Much better,” Ilya smirked sloppily.

Shane pushed him onto the mattress and said, “I’m just going to use the bathroom.”

“Mmmmm,” Ilya hummed, face pressed into his pillows.

A minute later, Shane returned. As he’d expected, Ilya was snoring. Thank god. Shane draped the blanket over him, and returned to the living room to clean up the mess of food packaging.

He’d come here seeking comfort and release, but now all Shane felt was confusion and more sadness. What bad things was Ilya talking about? What didn’t Shane see? It was probably just drunken nonsense, right? Shane sighed, and lay back on Ilya’s couch. He should really go home, but he wanted to soak in the scent of Ilya that lingered in the air just a little bit longer.

After a few minutes, Shane finally dragged himself up and scribbled a note for Ilya using the pad of paper that was stuck on the refrigerator with a magnet.

You fell asleep. Text me when you’re human again. – Shane

He inexplicably contemplated putting a heart next to his name, but thought better of it. Instead, he added a smiley face, just so Ilya knew he wasn’t upset with him.

You fell asleep. Text me when you’re human again. – Shane :)

Chapter End Notes

> Next Ilya interlude coming soon!! I love you all, my little hollanovs, we are living the dream right now. Thank you for reading and commenting and being lovely!!

Chapter 18: Ilya Interlude #9

Chapter Summary

> A little different than the past interludes, this one picks up where the previous chapter left off and won't just be Ilya's internal monologue. We're advancing the plot here, folks!

Ilya was very rudely awakened by rays of sunshine streaming in through his windows. Did he forget to close the curtains last night?

Oh. No.

Well, actually, yes.

He did forget to close the curtains. Because he was drunk. He'd downed nearly half a bottle of his *good* vodka yesterday. Things were grim.

But Shane put him to bed.

Fucking sweet and caring Shane Hollander brought him food and took care of him — a drunken rambling mess. Add it to the list of reasons he didn't deserve Shane.

Ilya grumbled and got out of bed, popped two advil and stuck his head under the faucet for some water, then dragged his feet to the kitchen to make coffee. He needed *so much* coffee. Once it was brewing, Ilya yawned and looked down at the kitchen island. There was a piece of paper from his notepad there with something scribbled on it.

You fell asleep. Text me when you're human again. – Shane :)

Ilya's heart clenched. It was all too much. He slowly bent down and pressed his forehead to the cold marble of the countertop, overwhelmed. The hangover was making his head throb and the devastation of losing the game was still weighing him down, but this note from Shane was a balm to his injured spirit. He didn't deserve it.

Getting all the way to game 7 just to lose in overtime to fucking Montreal was a gut punch, and he had felt he deserved a day of wallowing. Especially when things were so confusing with Shane right now.

It had been so blissfully good. Fucking and cuddling and sleeping and winning hockey games together. Until Svetlana had to show up and poke the bear. Ilya had asked her to wait outside, afraid of his old life and his new life colliding. Afraid of the exact questions Shane started asking. He loved Svetlana, he missed her. But if she and Shane met, Ilya wouldn't be able to keep the wall between his life in Canada and his life in Russia from crumbling.

Ilya didn't want to hurt Shane, he really didn't. That was the last thing he ever wanted to do. But he couldn't understand why Shane was so intent on learning about Ilya's stupid horrible childhood and his life in Russia. Since he was 12, he'd been working to get into the NHL, get out of Russia, and get a fresh start. So why did he need to rehash all the bad shit for Shane? It made no sense, and Ilya was frustrated that Shane kept pressing.

But there was a part of him, a part he tried to ignore, that longed to open up. To rip open the roughly healed wounds on his heart and let Shane see his bruises and scars. He imagined Shane's beautiful lips pressing kisses to all the wounds that he never wanted to think about, and his stomach twisted. He could never allow Shane to see those parts of him. He'd be disgusted.

Losing Shane wasn't an option, though. And if that meant only keeping Shane as a friend and teammate — well, Ilya would rather that than nothing. So if Shane really wanted to end it, Ilya would accept that if it meant they could still be friends. Shane was the best, most important friend he'd ever had, above all else.

After coffee and a shower, Ilya did feel a bit more like a human and less like a garbage heap, so he picked up his phone to text Shane. But waiting on his screen was a text from someone else.

Delzy: Hey Roz, how are you coping?

He had probably texted the same thing to the whole team today. Delzy was a good captain. But Ilya didn't really need checking up on.

Ilya: fine. thank you. you good?

Delzy: I'll be fine. Glad you're good. You up for a visit today? I was thinking about stopping by.

Ilya: why?

Delzy: Something I need to talk to you about. In person.

What the fuck was this? Was Ilya going to get traded or something? No, that wouldn't come from the captain.

Ilya frowned down at his phone in confusion, and then it clicked. This wasn't about the team. This was about Shane. He sighed. Ilya appreciated that Shane and Delzy had this mentor/older brother friendship situation going on, and he didn't have anything against Delzy. But he *really* didn't need his captain's input on his… whatever the fuck this was. Not relationship. Sort of relationship?

But he couldn't tell his captain to fuck off, not if he wanted to maintain his good graces. So…

Ilya: fine. am home. you need address?

Delzy: Nope. Be there in 10.

As expected, Ilya got a buzz up to his apartment about 10 minutes later. He unlocked the door and opened it so he was there waiting for Delzy when he walked up the hall.

"Nice place, Roz," Delzy said, looking around as he walked into Ilya's arguably very boring apartment that he hadn't put a lot of effort into making his own.

"Want something to drink?"

"Sure, got any coffee?"

Ilya started brewing a new pot, and Delzy sidled into one of the stools at Ilya's kitchen island.

"How are you feeling after the game?" Delzy asked, with his most captainly facial expression — serious but sincere.

"Is not about the game, why you are here. What is this, Delzy?" Ilya asked, slightly annoyed that the guy wasn't just getting to the point.

Delzy chuckled and looked down at his hands for a moment. "All right, you can see right through me. Fine, let's get right to it I guess."

Ilya waited, arms crossed over his chest.

"It's about Hollander," Delzy started, giving Ilya a knowing look.

"What about him?" Ilya asked with a skeptical look that he hoped made it clear he didn't care what Delzy had to say on the matter.

“He’s fucked up about the loss,” Delzy sighed, and Ilya’s resolve melted a little. He hated that he’d been such a mess when Shane probably needed him yesterday.

“But he’s also fucked up about you,” Delzy continued.

Ilya rolled his eyes. “Is your business now?”

“It is when he’s clearly letting it affect his game.”

“Ah,” Ilya nodded bitterly. “So. Is about hockey, not Hollander.”

“No, that’s not what I mean, come on, man,” Delzy pushed back. “You know that he’s crazy about you, right?”

Ilya couldn’t help it, his lips tipped up into the slightest smile. He did know, but it sent a spark of excitement through him to hear someone else say it.

Delzy kept talking, “So if you’re not serious about whatever it is you two are doing, you should let him down easy now, give him the summer to recover. He doesn’t need his heart broken, but the least you could do is break it when he has time to heal.”

Frustration flared in Ilya’s chest.

“You know nothing,” Ilya said flatly, breathing heavily to hold in his anger.

“I know what Hollander told me, I know that he's spiraling about it. Again.”

“What did Shane say to you?”

“I’m not going to tell you everything he said, that’s not fair to him. But he feels really strongly about you, Roz,” Delzy replied. “Really really strongly. And he doesn’t think you feel the same. So if you don’t, you’d be doing him a favor to let him down easy.”

“This is bullshit,” Ilya left the kitchen, fury roiling inside of him. He stormed over to the front door, ready to open it and usher Delzy out. “*You* are bullshit.”

He was annoyed at Shane for bringing Delzy into this, and at Delzy for interfering, but mostly at himself for getting himself into this situation in the first place. He knew he was fucked from the beginning, but he couldn’t resist, and now he had to deal with this shit. He was over it,

and he needed Delzy to leave.

“It’s not bullshit, get your head out of your ass. You’re everything to him,” Delzy insisted, standing but not leaving the kitchen.

Of course Ilya knew this, it was painted all over Shane’s face whenever they were alone together. The shy, needy, desperately adoring look in Shane’s eyes when it was just him and Ilya tangled together in bed — it would stay in his heart forever. And Ilya just *couldn’t* be open to Shane in the same way, there was too much ugliness inside him.

“I know this!” Ilya yelled, the dam holding back his emotions finally breaking. “You think I am stupid?”

“You’re acting pretty fucking stupid,” Delzy shot back. “Not just stupid — mean. You’re stringing this kid along, for what? For a regular fuck on the road?”

“Fuck you, I love him!” Ilya spat in a choked rage.

The words were out of his mouth before he could pull them back, and Delzy’s face went slack with shock.

Ilya’s chest was heaving with the intensity of his fury and emotion, and his mind was spinning. *Did he just say that out loud? To fucking Delzy of all people? God damn it.*

“Will you leave?” Ilya asked impatiently.

“You love him?” Delzy almost whispered.

“None of your business,” Ilya knew he couldn’t reel those words back in, but he didn’t have to say them out loud again. He didn’t have to confirm the admission he’d just made.

“Roz,” Delzy walked towards him, pity and confusion in his eyes. It made Ilya infinitely more annoyed. “If you love him, why don’t you just tell him?”

“You understand nothing,” Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Well, fucking explain then,” Delzy retorted.

“No,” Ilya crossed his arms again. “I said, none of your business. Between me and Shane.”

Delzy sighed and shoved his hands into his long messy hair, looking like he was ready to pull it out.

“I don’t know why I’m even here,” Delzy turned his back on Ilya, walking towards the kitchen, head still in his hands. “Absolute morons, both of you.”

Ilya scoffed and Delzy whipped back around to face him.

“You don’t know how fucking good you have it,” Delzy said emphatically, pointing at Ilya. “You think it’s easy to be gay in the NHL? You think you’ll ever have anything like this again in this league? You’re both idiots. You have everything I ever wanted right in front of you, and you’re being so fucking stupid!”

Ilya opened and closed his mouth a few times without saying anything, unsure how to respond. He didn’t know what Delzy was talking about, but it was clear that this was about a lot more than him and Shane. It hung in the air, this almost-confession, the awkwardness of it lingering between them.

“Uh. Coffee is ready,” was the reply Ilya landed on.

Delzy let out a sarcastic laugh. “Great.”

“Sit,” Ilya offered, waving a hand towards the stool Delzy sat in earlier and walking back into the kitchen.

He went through the motions of pouring them both cups of coffee, and handed one to Delzy, who took it without speaking. They stayed like that, sipping in silence, for a few minutes. Ilya didn’t know what to say.

Even without the hangover, this would be far too much raw emotional honesty for Ilya. He wanted Delzy to leave so he could stew in this misery alone, or be weak and text Shane, but Ilya felt kind of bad for his captain now.

Finally, Delzy set down his mug and sighed, then spoke, “Sorry about that.”

Ilya shrugged one shoulder. He still wasn’t thrilled about this visit, so he wasn’t feeling quick to forgive. But he waited for Delzy to continue.

“Did Hollander tell you that I had a thing with a teammate in my

rookie year?"

"No." If Delzy hadn't just thrown a bomb onto his quiet morning, Ilya would be a lot more curious about this development. But as it stood, he was finding it hard to care.

"Well, I won't go into the gory details, but it didn't end well."

"Oh. Sorry."

Ilya was being more of a dick than he needed to be, but he was still hungover and annoyed.

"You okay now?" Ilya asked, attempting to be more sympathetic.

"Well, I thought so, it was over a decade ago. But seems like it's still bothering me."

"Oh."

What the fuck was Ilya supposed to say to him? This guy was in his 30s. He should have a better handle on his shit than a 20-year-old.

"My point is that you and Hollander might actually be the lucky ones, if you can figure your shit out."

"Is not that simple," Ilya replied, frustration rushing back.

"Isn't it?" Delzy asked. "You love him?"

Ilya looked down at his coffee. Of course he loved Shane. He loved every stupid thing about him, from his freckles to his slap shot to his steely determination and the way it melted into giggles when Ilya teased him. The way Ilya felt about Shane scared the shit out of him. That had to be love.

"Yes," Ilya allowed himself to admit again.

"Then don't be a fucking idiot. It might not be that simple, but it sure as fuck can't be that complicated. I'm not telling you to come out — I'd never do that. The NHL is run by homophobic assholes. The players, the fans, they're all awful. And Russia probably wouldn't be thrilled to welcome you home either. But if you guys can manage to have whatever it is you've had these last few months, don't fuck that up by getting in your own way."

Ilya let the words sink in. Delzy didn't understand what Shane had

asked of Ilya and why it was so painful. But he wasn't wrong. If he loved Shane, which he did, he needed to not fuck it up any more than he already did.

"Okay," Ilya said, not looking up from his coffee cup. What else could he say?

After Delzy left, Ilya crawled back into bed. He wanted to disappear into the jumble of blankets and never come back. But he also really wanted Shane.

Tomorrow, they'd have their first of several post-playoffs debriefs as a team. It would be painful, but they'd get through it. Then they'd have to go back to the arena and clear out their stalls. After that, Ilya wasn't sure what he was going to do with himself or where he would go. He wasn't ready to go back to Russia, but he needed to get away from Ottawa.

Until then, though, he had a few more days he could spend with Shane. It wouldn't solve any problems, it wouldn't make their situation any easier, but if he could have Shane here with him for a little bit longer, he would take it. He grabbed his phone.

Ilya: am human again :)

Shane: i can be over in 20 min

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> I offer my infinite appreciation to Nico, Paupy, and dntat for being my betas and cheerleaders!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After the initial pain of his fight with Ilya, Shane felt less raw — the fresh pain of getting knocked out of the playoffs was much more sharp, and he needed the comfort of Ilya's presence and would settle for that.

He was beating himself up pretty hard following the team's post-mortem of the season. For all intents and purposes, Shane had played very well in the playoffs. And yes, he and Ilya both set new team records for most goals by a rookie in their first season — with Ilya setting the new record. And sure, they also both ranked in the top five of most goals scored by a rookie in the entire NHL *ever*. Shane still felt he could have played better in those final few games.

Shane followed Ilya home after their final debrief meeting, and Ilya allowed him 20 minutes of self-analysis and listing out everything he needed to improve for next season before cutting him off and dragging him to bed. They'd found a balance, even if it was unsteady. They were pointedly *not* mentioning Svetlana or their fight, nor did they bring up their summer plans at all in the days after that devastating game seven.

After their locker cleanout day, Hayden and Jackie would be spending one final night together before Hayden headed back to Toronto to be with his family for the start of the summer, so Shane would be vacating their apartment to give them one more night alone. Hayden was acting like being separated from his girlfriend was the greatest human suffering anyone could endure, and Shane heard Jackie comforting him, saying "we'll talk every day, I promise, and I'm taking your hoodie to sleep in every night."

It was all very dramatic and emotional if you asked Shane. They'd see each other in less than a month when Jackie's semester ended, and Toronto wasn't that far from Ottawa. It was a lot closer than Moscow.

Shane desperately wanted to know what Ilya planned to do between

now and the NHL awards in June, which they'd both be attending as contenders for the rookie of the year award. And then, Shane assumed, Ilya would return to Russia until training camp started in September.

It felt like a game of chicken — both of them knowing that they'd soon be going their separate ways, neither of them acknowledging it. In fact, they spent very little time talking, Ilya always pulling Shane on top of him or under him, keeping their mouths occupied and Shane distracted.

The thought of being separated for nearly three months after spending almost every day together since October was more painful than Shane had expected. He was itching to invite Ilya to come visit him this summer at his parents' cottage, where he'd be for all of August. It was in a beautifully remote location on a lake about two hours outside of Ottawa, and his small family had gone there every summer since Shane was a kid.

It was his favorite place in the world, the only place he felt he could truly relax after the last few years of media frenzy in Ottawa that had forced Shane into the public eye. They had a few neighbors who Shane had known almost his entire life, and the employees at the local grocery stores and cafes knew the Hollanders well and treated Shane like a normal teenager. This summer his parents would drive up in the middle of July, and Shane would join them a week later for the remaining two weeks of their vacation.

After his parents left he'd have two or three weeks to himself on the lake, for the first time ever, and he was so looking forward to the peace and quiet. The only thing that would make it even better was having Ilya there with him in this haven far from any prying eyes, where they could swim and canoe and hike — and yes, where they could fuck and sleep together for days in a row with no obligations or interruptions. It was something Shane had been fantasizing about for a while now, especially on nights after losses on the road when Ilya held him close, and the comfort of his arms reminded Shane of how safe he felt at the cottage.

But the fear of rejection kept stopping Shane. He didn't think Ilya would be interested in his boring parents' boring cottage in the middle of nowhere, not when he would be back in the big, vibrant city that was his home. Probably reconnecting with old friends, able to communicate freely in his native language. Ilya would have no need for Shane then. And Shane could only hope that when Ilya returned to

Canada, he wasn't in love with Svetlana or some other beautiful Russian model who could be the perfect hockey wife.

The day Hayden left, Shane invited Ilya over to his apartment for a change. They were lounging on Shane's couch, one of Shane's legs draped between Ilya's, having just interrupted a game of NHL on Shane's Playstation to make out and then, inevitably, blow each other.

"You always want to make out right when I'm starting to beat you, you realize that right?" Shane asked in a joking accusation.

"What? No. Would never do that," Ilya replied in mock offense. "How could you accuse me like this?"

"I finally scored a goal and you started kissing my neck!"

"Is a coincidence. Your neck looked very good that moment," Ilya leaned over and started kissing Shane's neck again, making Shane squeal in mock protest.

They settled back into a comfortable silence, Ilya absently stroking Shane's thigh, Shane's fingers curling around a strand of Ilya's hair. The thought of the cottage popped into Shane's mind again, and he needed to finally pluck up the courage to ask Ilya this thing he'd been avoiding for days.

"So, about this summer…" Shane started.

Ilya's hand stopped its lazy movements and his muscles tensed immediately, almost imperceptibly, but Shane felt it.

"I know you're probably going back to Russia after the awards in June. But I was wondering… would you want to maybe come back to Canada a little early? I'm going to be at my parents' cottage in August. It's on this lake out in the middle of nowhere. It's really beautiful, it's probably my favorite place in the world, and we have canoes and a hot tub, and um, my parents are letting me stay there alone for a while, so I was thinking… uh, I was thinking it might be fun to spend some time there. Together."

Shane followed his rambling question with a long exhale, relieved at having finally asked and anxiously waiting for a reply. Ilya's hand started its soothing rhythm on Shane's leg again, and Shane nuzzled into Ilya's side, waiting for him to say something. Anything.

“Maybe.”

It was a one word answer, but at least it wasn’t no.

“Okay.” Shane didn’t know what else to say to an answer that revealed nothing about what Ilya was actually thinking. They stayed like that for another few minutes before Ilya said more.

“I… might have family obligations,” Ilya supplied.

“Oh, sure, that’s important. But if you can get away… I’ll be there. And I’ll be here in Ottawa the rest of the summer, so. Yeah.”

It was a not-so-subtle invitation for Ilya to share what he would be doing until June, which he did, with a not-so-subtle sigh.

“In two days, I will go to Boston to train with Sergei Vetrov and coach at his hockey school,” Ilya said in such an offhand tone that Shane didn’t properly register his words for a minute.

When they finally sunk in, Shane sat up and pulled his legs off Ilya’s lap. His heart fell into his stomach.

“What do you mean? You’re not staying in Ottawa until the awards? I thought…” Shane was going to say “I thought we had more time” but it sounded pathetic, even in his head.

“Sergei invited me yesterday. Is an honor to be invited by him, you know? I have to go,” Ilya shrugged.

“How long will you be gone for?” Shane asked, trying to be relaxed and failing miserably.

“Until the awards. I will fly to Vegas from Boston, easier that way.”

Ilya was pointedly avoiding Shane’s gaze, and the hurt was spreading from Shane’s heart into his veins.

“Right, yeah, that makes sense,” Shane nodded, feeling a lump form in his throat.

Shane looked at Ilya, and Ilya looked down at his hands, both of them stifled under the weight of Ilya’s unspoken words. Ilya finally turned his head to Shane, and his eyes were distant and maybe a little sad.

“Is… probably good to be apart for a while.”

“Yep,” Shane nodded, tears welling in his eyes. “Good idea…”

Well, this was it. Ilya was done with Shane. Shane knew it was coming, but he thought he’d have him here until June at least. And then they’d part ways, and return for their second season as nothing but teammates and friends. But it ended today.

Shane tried to smile, but the tears were starting to fall, and he was sure he looked like a complete mess. But he couldn’t really control it. Ilya wasn’t crying, but he looked at Shane with such sorrow, he might as well be. He turned and leaned towards Shane, gently kissing one of Shane’s tear-damp cheeks, then the other. He moved to Shane’s slightly parted lips, softly kissing and Shane had to have more.

With a soft whimper, Shane opened his mouth and Ilya’s tongue met his in a deep, all-encompassing kiss that said everything neither of them were willing to say.

I’m sorry. I’m going to miss you. I love you.

Ilya pulled away slowly, and a string of saliva trailed from Shane’s lips to his, like a last point of connection desperately trying to keep them together. It broke, and Ilya stood. Shane scrambled up to follow him to the door, not sure what to say, but wishing there were *something* that would keep Ilya here. How could Shane make this final moment of this brief, beautiful thing last forever?

When Ilya got to the door, he turned back to Shane, hand on the knob.

“See you in Las Vegas, Hollander,” he sighed.

Don’t go. Stay here tonight. I love you.

That’s what Shane wanted to say. Instead he simply replied with, “Yeah. See you there.”

And Ilya was gone. This version of Ilya, who kissed and touched and teased and fucked Shane like he was something special, something precious, was gone forever.

***

A week later, Shane was at the dining room table at his parents’ house, quietly eating as they chatted about their day and the neighbors and how they needed to clean off the deck now that the

weather was getting a little warmer. Shane had hardly spoken the whole evening, beyond greetings and short answers to questions. He knew he was wallowing a little too hard, but he didn't have it in him to fake cheerfulness, not here at home — the one place he felt he could really be himself.

He'd spent most of the week alone, working out for long hours to the point of exhaustion and rewatching all the Centaurs playoff games to scrutinize his every move on the ice. The one thing Shane could rely on was hockey. He could always turn to perfecting his body and his game. Hockey had always been there for him, and it had never let him down. And, to be fair to them, the same was true of his parents, and Shane loved them for that.

"Shane," his mom interrupted his train of thought, and he looked up to see both of his parents looking at him with concerned expressions.

"Huh? What was that? Sorry," he forced a pleasant smile onto his face.

"Is there something wrong, honey? Are you still feeling down about the playoffs? Because, you played so well, and —"

Shane cut her off, "No, it's not that, Mom. I'm fine, really."

"All right. Well, you know you can talk to us, right? Is there something else going on?"

His dad nodded in agreement.

"Um… no, not really? I don't know. I don't want to talk about it, I guess."

"Okay, then. We won't bother you about it."

They all went back to eating, the silence in the room more awkward than it had been earlier, his parents' concern still lingering in the air.

Now that his fling with Ilya was really and truly over, Shane had been wondering about his life and what it would look like as a gay NHL player. Because if they couldn't be together, Shane didn't know if he'd be able to be with *anyone.*

He'd been thinking a lot about Delzy, who was back home in Vancouver for the summer, and what he might be doing. Who he might be seeing back home. Had Delzy ever had a serious relationship? Shane didn't think so. And that was pretty fucking

depressing — for Delzy but also for Shane. He didn't want to go his whole career being alone and only hooking up with random guys while the rest of his teammates fell in love and got married and started families.

Shane hated the idea of keeping this part of himself secret for the next — he hoped — twenty or more years of his life as an NHL star. And maybe he would never be able to fully come out. He might not ever *want* to come out publicly. But that didn't mean he had to keep this secret from everyone. So, maybe right now was as good a time as any.

"Actually, there is something I want to talk about," Shane said into the quiet room.

Both of his parents put down their utensils and looked at him.

"What is it, son?" His dad prompted.

Oh fuck.

Was Shane really going to do this?

His parents weren't bigots, they had gay friends, Shane was pretty sure. They were definitely friendly with the lesbian couple who lived a few doors down and walked their dogs past the house every day. He could do this. It would be fine.

"Well, you know how I broke up with Jenna last year?"

Why the fuck was he starting with talking about his high school girlfriend?

"Sure. She was such a nice girl, too, what's she up to?" His mom asked, a hint of hopefulness in her voice.

Not helpful, mom.

"Uh, I don't know… we didn't really keep in touch. That's not really the point."

They waited for him to continue.

"Okay, so yeah, Jenna was great. But I never really… she wasn't really my type."

Another silence.

“And I haven’t really met another girl who *is* my type.”

Shane was hoping that they might figure it out, put him out of his misery by saying it for him, but they patiently sat there with encouraging faces.

“Because my type is actually… Well, it’s actually men.”

He breathed out a long breath, and looked down at his plate, not sure if he was ready to see their faces yet.

“I’m gay.”

The sound of a chair scraping against the floor met Shane’s ears and he looked up to see his mom rushing over to his side. She leaned down and wrapped her arms around him and Shane stood to meet her in a hug. His dad stood too, and wrapped his arms around them both.

“Oh Shane,” his mom said as they separated. She held his arms and looked up at him. “We love you so much. Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us this. This must have been so hard for you to carry all alone.”

His dad clapped a strong hand on his shoulder and added, “We’re here for you, Shane. We love you no matter what.”

Shane was overwhelmed. He hadn’t really planned on coming out today, and the shock of what he’d just done hit him like a rogue wave, making him fall back into his chair, looking up at his mom and dad. At that moment, he was transported back to being a kid, telling them that he was going to play in the NHL one day. They had the same pride and love on their faces now as they did then, and Shane felt so relieved and so much lighter that he burst into unexpected laughter.

“What’s so funny?” His mom asked, looking indignant. “We do love you!”

“I know,” Shane breathed as his laughter subsided. “I love you guys too. It’s just such a relief to tell you. I knew you would be cool about it, I just… I didn’t plan on telling you this tonight.”

“We’re glad you did,” his dad smiled.

They all went back to their chairs and started eating again, but Shane could tell by the look on his mom’s face that she was dying to say something.

“What is it, mom? Go ahead and say whatever it is you’re thinking,” he muttered with a rueful smile.

“If you don’t mind… I do have some questions.” Yuna Hollander would always need more information so she could figure out how she alone could solve Shane’s problems, and Shane was used to that by now, however lovingly misguided it was.

“So, how long have you known? Have you told anyone else? Is there anyone you’re… seeing? Is there a boy we should know about?”

Oof. That last question stung. And Shane wondered if she already had Ilya in mind when she asked the question.

“I haven’t known long, um, and you’re not the only ones who know. Delzy, uh Conrad DelZotto, you know my captain, he knows too. And he’s been great, totally accepting and whatever. But, no one else knows. And I’m not going to tell the rest of the team. I can’t… I can’t really tell anyone else.”

And maybe he told a tiny lie, but he *really* did not want to talk about Ilya right now.

“I knew DelZotto was a good captain,” Shane’s mom nodded approvingly. “You haven’t even told Hayden? Or Ilya?”

God, could she stop bringing him up?

“Nope, no,” Shane shook his head.

“It’s understandable, Yuna,” his dad chimed in. “They’re good kids, but you never really know. I know how locker rooms can be.”

“I suppose you’re right. But Shane, are you going to keep this a secret forever? That seems awfully lonely.”

Shane sighed. This was getting to be too much.

“I don’t really know yet, mom. It’s all pretty new. So, I think just us for now, if that’s okay.”

“Of course it is, sweetie. But we’re here for you if you ever want to… well, it’ll be tough. But if you did want to tell more people, we’d be behind you 100 percent.”

“Thank you. Thank you both,” he looked at them with such gratitude, he didn’t think he could properly express it. “I don’t really know what

this will mean for me, but I'm really grateful I have you."

At that, his mom started crying and hugging Shane again, kissing the top of his head just like she did when he was little and he fell on the ice — before she told him to get back out there.

***

Hayden returned to Ottawa a few weeks later and sat Shane down to ask him if he would be offended if Hayden asked Jackie to move into their apartment — and asked Shane to move out. Shane was relieved; it saved him the trouble of having to tell Hayden he wanted to get his own place. A month ago, Shane had been thinking about Ilya's suggestion that Shane move into his building. That seemed like a terrible idea now, so Shane wasn't really sure what he was going to do. He had about a month to decide.

In the meantime, he just had to attend his first NHL awards, see Ilya for the first time since he left Shane crying on his couch, and either win or lose an award to his best friend who broke his heart. No big deal.

His mom and dad flew out to Las Vegas with him, then went off on their own while Shane had to do media engagements and generally freak out alone in his hotel room. He hadn't seen Ilya yet, but knew he must be here, the awards were the next night. Shane wondered if Ilya would text him. He wanted to text Ilya so badly, but he resisted the urge. He didn't want to seem pathetic or desperate, even though he felt very much like he was both.

They hadn't really communicated at all in the time that Ilya was in Boston, besides a couple of pictures here and there. Ilya sent Shane a picture of Boston Common, which made Shane's heart clench and break a little more, remembering that first road trip when they became real friends. Shane sent Ilya a picture of the old Centaurs poster in his childhood bedroom, featuring Delzy, that Ilya had found so funny when he was there for Christmas. But they hadn't actually said anything.

The morning of the awards, Shane had breakfast with his parents at one of the hotel restaurants then retreated back to his room to get ready for the ceremony that afternoon. He'd heard from Delzy, who wasn't going to make it this year, but who wished him good luck. Shane wondered if he wished Ilya good luck too. It was rare for two players on the same team to be up for the same award, especially

rookie of the year, but there wasn't much about Shane and Ilya that didn't break the mold when it came to hockey.

About an hour before Shane had to be in the theater, he was ready to go in his suit. He didn't know what to do with himself, so he simply sat on the edge of his bed staring blankly at the TV while a sitcom rerun went to commercial.

All he could think about was seeing Ilya in less than 60 minutes. What would he do? How would he hold back everything he was feeling when he saw those sparkling hazel eyes and his ridiculous crooked smile? Shane couldn't take it anymore.

Shane: hey

Shane: are u in vegas?

Ilya: hi. yes. in hotel. you?

Shane: same. my parents are here too. they want to say hi tonight

Ilya: will be nice to see them

A moment passed and Shane assumed that was it. End of conversation, and they'd see each other soon.

Ilya: will be nice to see you too

Oh.

Shane: yeah. you too.

Shane: what room are you in?

Ilya: 1401

It was an impulse, not a well thought out plan. Ilya always seemed to do that to him. Made him act instead of think. So Shane was in an elevator going down 3 floors.

He knocked on the door of 1401 and waited, holding his breath. Ilya opened the door wide, and Shane simply stared, overwhelmed by the sight of him.

Ilya was in his suit pants and button down, but hadn't put on his tie or jacket yet. His gold chain glinted around his neck, drawing Shane's eye. He raked his gaze up from Ilya's neck to his clean-shaven jaw,

and perfectly styled curls that made Ilya look so effortlessly handsome it almost took Shane's breath away.

"Hi," Ilya said.

"Hi," Shane replied.

They just stood there, staring at each other.

"Um, can I come in?" Shane finally asked.

Ilya stepped back and let Shane pass, the door closing behind him. Shane *really* wanted to kiss him. It took every bit of restraint he had not to. He noticed Ilya clenching his fist at his side and wondered if he was having the same struggle.

"So, uh, how was Boston?" Shane offered, trying to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Good." Ilya replied, sort of monotone. "Great. Vetrov, he is great. Good to train with him, being able to talk in Russian, you know."

"Right, yeah," Shane nodded. "That sounds great."

"How was Ottawa?" Ilya asked, still standing right inside the door, facing Shane.

"Oh, you know, the same," Shane shrugged. "Worked out a lot. Spent time with my parents. It's been nice."

I have hated this last month. Ottawa felt empty without you. I missed you every day.

"Good."

They had never been so awkward around each other, not even when they met that first time in Saskatchewan and Ilya was so rude to Shane before he destroyed his team in the World Juniors final. Even then, the tension wasn't so palpable and heavy. Something had to give.

"Ilya," Shane started, a note of desperation in his voice.

And it was like something snapped. Ilya moved fast, taking three long strides to Shane and wrapping an arm around him, hauling their bodies together, and crashing his mouth down onto Shane's. Shane let out a muffled yelp of surprise that morphed into a moan and Ilya

pressed his tongue past Shane's lips into his eager mouth. They kissed deep and slow for a few long minutes, holding each other tightly, like they were afraid of letting go.

When Ilya finally pulled back, Shane leaned forward, chasing the kiss for a second before stepping back, dazed.

"Whoa." Shane whispered, bringing a hand to his still wet lips. He felt momentarily dizzy.

Looking at Ilya, he seemed as dazed as Shane felt, like he couldn't believe he'd just done that. Shane needed more.

"Ilya," Shane reached a hand up to cradle Ilya's face. "I missed you so fucking much."

Ilya dropped his head to rest against Shane's forehead. "When I left... I should not have left like I did."

Shane wanted to be angry, wanted to yell and push Ilya off of him and demand that he apologize, but he just couldn't. Not when Ilya was so close and smelled like that minty shampoo Shane associated with all good feelings.

"It's okay. It's okay, really," Shane eased, stroking a hand down Ilya's arm. "I mean, it's not, it was really shitty, but it's just so good to see you I don't care right now."

They both laughed lightly and Ilya nipped at Shane's lips again in a few small, sweet kisses. Shane finally pulled back and looked back to the clock on the night stand.

"Oh shit, we need to be downstairs in like 20 minutes."

"Fuck. Already forgot about that," Ilya sighed.

"You forgot that we're both up for rookie of the year?" Shane asked, disbelieving.

"For one second, yes," Ilya shrugged.

"You should finish getting dressed," Shane gestured at Ilya in his half-ready state.

"You should fix your hair," Ilya chuckled.

"Oh fuck you, did you mess up my hair?" Shane complained as he

turned to the mirror and harumphed at the sight of himself.

Ilya started tying his tie while Shane straightened himself out, and then looked back at Ilya.

“I need to go meet my mom and dad,” Shane sighed.

“Right,” Ilya nodded. “I um… I brought Svetlana. She is in another room. But, you know, my family…”

He trailed off, and Shane didn’t know what to say. When he met Svetlana before, he completely freaked out and ran away. And the jealousy he felt then was creeping back up, but Shane tried to shut it down. She was his friend. He should have a friend here with him, especially if he couldn’t have his family.

“That’s great,” Shane said, maybe too enthusiastically. “I’m glad you have someone here supporting you,” he continued, more evenly.

“Yes, is good to have her,” Ilya replied, with a relieved half-smile.

“So um… will you guys be hanging out all night? Or could we meet back here after the ceremony?”

“No,” Ilya said, “Yes. Yes, we can meet back here. Will have to go to afterparty first, with Svetlana. She wants to meet Scott fucking Hunter.”

Ilya rolled his eyes and Shane chuckled.

“I hate afterparties.”

“I know,” Ilya smiled fondly and grabbed his suit jacket.

“Think you’re going to win?” Shane asked, reluctant to leave.

“Do you?” Ilya asked in response.

“No, I think you’re going to win,” Shane replied. And he found that he wasn’t even disappointed when he thought about it.

“No. You will win.”

“You think?” Shane asked, blushing.

“Of course.”

They held each others' gaze for another second before Shane walked toward the door.

"See you down there?" he asked, looking back from the door frame.

"Yes," Ilya nodded.

"Cool."

***

"Hello Las Vegas!" Called one of the presenters, an actor named Kenny Lopez.

"Wow, what an amazing crowd, it's so great to be here with you all tonight!" Roman Hart, the other presenter, followed.

The pair were known for their buddy cop movies that Shane was sure he'd seen, but didn't actually remember.

"We're honored to be here to present the Calder Memorial Trophy for Rookie of the Year."

"And as two guys who are known for their friendship on and off screen, it's only appropriate that we're the ones announcing these two nominees."

"That's right, Kenny! It's rare for the players up for this award to be on the same team, but it's a surprise to no one that the Ottawa Centaurs' rookie centers are our two nominees. Both have broken records and made big impressions on all of us this year."

"And, like us, they're also best friends! So let's hear a bit more about our nominees."

Shane held his breath. Ilya was across the aisle and one row ahead, Svetlana's long blonde hair shining next to him, and Shane saw her put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze. They had greeted each other briefly before taking their seats, and Shane's mom and dad had greeted Ilya warmly, with a tight hug from his mom and a handshake from his dad. Since then, Shane had mostly been staring at the back of Ilya's head all night, which he found much more interesting than the country music stars and important hockey people moving across the stage.

But he dragged his eyes to the screen behind the stage to watch the

short videos that would announce him and Ilya as nominees. He wanted to sink into the floor. Shane loved hockey and he loved being great at hockey. But he hated this part of it. He wanted the award, of course he did. But why did it have to be this whole production?

The video started. Ilya's was first, and Shane's heart swelled with pride. They pulled together clips of some of Ilya's best goals of the year, including one off an assist from Shane that he vividly remembered. He could almost feel Ilya's arms around him, reminiscing about the way they had embraced after that goal, and how they'd celebrated back in their hotel room.

But to Shane's horror, the next clip wasn't of Ilya at all — it was Shane. At a press conference months ago, one Shane had almost forgotten, where he'd ranted about the media pitting them against each other.

"And I'll finish by saying that Ilya absolutely deserves the Calder, and I'll be shocked if he doesn't get it. He's an incredible player and it's an honor to be in the running with him."

The Shane on the screen looked determined and like he was restraining a lot of frustration. Shane remembered the moment, and he had been genuinely furious. He couldn't believe they had pulled that clip. He caught Ilya glancing back at him with a small smile on his face, and Shane hoped the cameras weren't on him right then, because he was sure he was bright red.

Ilya turned back to the screen as it flashed to clips of Shane now, some of his best goals, also including one off an Ilya assist. His mom elbowed him a couple of times, and he looked over to her absolutely beaming with pride, and his heart clenched. This moment was probably worth it for that alone. He didn't love all this fanfare, but his parents sure did.

Shane turned his eyes back to the screen and froze when the video cut to a clip of Ilya. But not from that same press conference. No, it was something Shane had never seen before — from the All-Stars fan vote campaign. Short clips of Ilya talking to someone off-screen, sitting in front of some Centaurs-themed backdrop.

"When I came from Russia to Canada, first person from the team to greet me was Shane Hollander… He learned how to say hello to me in Russian for first day at training camp. Hollander is nicest Canadian boy… Our friendship, it is very important to me… Nobody as serious about hockey as

Hollander, he will practice practice practice later than everyone else, even though he is already better than everyone…"

The screen faded to photos of both of them as the audience clapped politely. Shane was floored. He knew that Ilya had made that video, but he did *not* know what Ilya had said in it — he told the whole fucking world that Shane's friendship was important to him, and Shane was learning about it *now*. In a room full of every important person in the NHL. And broadcast on live television.

He was staring, dumbfounded, at the back of Ilya's head, his perfectly coiffed hair and broad shoulders. Svetlana turned to look back at Shane. She had a knowing smile on her face, and Shane was *definitely* blushing furiously and the cameras were *definitely* on him as the guys on stage started speaking again.

"Well, boys, we hope this doesn't ruin your friendship," Kenny said.

"You still have to play together next season!" Roman added, and everyone in the room chuckled except Shane.

"And the Calder Trophy for Rookie of the Year goes to…" he ripped the envelope, "Ilya Rozanov!"

The audience burst into applause, and Shane felt a momentary pang of envy or disappointment or something, but quickly started clapping with the rest.

Any resentment faded as he saw Ilya stand with a shocked look on his face and hugged Svetlana and she leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. Ilya turned back to look at Shane, who found himself standing, without even thinking about it as Ilya approached and they met in the aisle between them. Shane desperately wanted to grab him by his lapels and kiss him, but instead he reached out a hand to grasp Ilya's. Ilya pulled him into a manly bro-hug, patting his back a couple of times, and Shane almost laughed at the absurdity of the gesture. Ilya leaned down into the hug, and Shane whispered in his ear, "told you you'd win."

Ilya pulled back and made his way up to the stage, where the actors handed Ilya the trophy and he stood a little awkwardly in front of the mic.

"Ah, wow, okay. This is… thank you. My English is not the best, but I guess my hockey is," Ilya winked, and Shane rolled his eyes as the audience all laughed. Shane heard his mom huff, like she wanted to

argue with that statement, and he loved her for it. “Thank you to the Centaurs — team and coaches and everyone. And Hollander. Thank you for being second best rookie, but first best teammate.”

Shane’s heart exploded and melted and did a somersault in his chest all at once. Hearing that from Ilya, in front of this whole room — really, the whole world — felt like a far better award than any trophy. Shane was so stupidly in love, he thought he might combust.

Ilya was escorted off the stage as the host took over. There were still 5 awards to sit through, and all Shane wanted to do was drag Ilya up to his room and drop to his knees to show Ilya exactly how touched he was by his comments. But he had to sit here next to his parents and pretend he wasn’t getting a semi just thinking about Ilya.

He was snapped out of that train of thought by his mom’s hand on his shoulder. She leaned over to whisper in his ear, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You should have won that one. Even Ilya said you’re the best.”

“It’s okay mom, really. I’m happy for him — he deserved it just as much as I did.”

The look on her face told Shane she didn’t feel the same, but she conceded a bit, “Well, if it wasn’t you, I’m glad it was my second favorite player.”

Shane’s dad snorted and someone in the row in front of them turned to glare at them for interrupting the song that some terrible singer was performing.

At some point, Ilya had made his way back to his seat, and Shane happily gazed at him while all the bad jokes were made and awards were given out. Shane intended to beeline to Ilya as soon as it was over, but apparently a lot of people had that same intention. Ilya was immediately swarmed by other players offering their congratulations and fans who wanted to take pictures with him.

Shane and his parents got swept up in the crowd making their way to the after party in a ballroom in the hotel/casino, and he lost sight of Ilya for a while. He wished that Delzy or Hayden were there so he’d have someone else to talk to, because he felt pretty awkward.

The same could not be said of his mom — she was having an animated conversation with Shane’s coach, who nodded along politely as she gave him play-making advice. Shane’s dad was at the bar

getting drinks, leaving Shane to scan the crowd for the golden brown curls he was desperate to sink his fingers into.

After about an hour of making polite conversation and accepting condolences for his loss from various players across the league, Shane had to get out of there. He told his parents, who were deep in conversation at a table of what looked like other players' parents, that he was going to get some air.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he texted Ilya that he was going back to his room and to let him know when he was leaving the party. Shane lay flat on his back on the mattress in his hotel room, starting at the ceiling, waiting. A year ago, right before he was drafted, he would never have imagined being okay losing the Calder to Ilya Rozanov. He never would have imagined a lot of the things that happened with Ilya this season. But he couldn't seem to muster up any regrets.

An hour passed and he still didn't get a reply from Ilya. Shane wondered if Ilya had changed his mind and didn't want to see him again tonight after all. He'd probably be heading to Moscow soon, so maybe he needed a clean break. Shane didn't blame him, but it didn't hurt any less. His hotel room was becoming stifling, his anxious thoughts polluting the air. Leaving his jacket and tie behind, Shane took the elevator up to the roof to get some air.

When he reached the top floor, he walked in the opposite direction of the music and rabble of the rooftop bar, heading instead towards a railing where there was an incredible view of the Vegas strip. There was a figure silhouetted against the sparkling skyline, a figure Shane would recognize anywhere, leaning against the railing with a cigarette between two fingers.

"You know, smoking is really unhealthy," Shane said as he approached and leaned his side against the railing.

"Really? Thought it was good for me," Ilya smiled at Shane as he replied, both of them taken back to that night in Boston at the start of the season. That moment they became friends.

"I texted you," Shane said tentatively.

"I know..." Ilya said, exhaling smoke away from Shane. "Sorry. Was a lot down there. Needed air."

"Yeah, me too," Shane sighed.

He turned from facing Ilya to look out over the skyline and simply breathe together. Ilya stubbed out his cigarette against the wall of the railing and put the butt in his pocket, and Shane was surprised when Ilya was the one to break the silence.

“Sorry I beat you. Again.”

Shane wasn’t looking at him, but he could feel the smirk in Ilya’s voice.

“No you’re not. You love it.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You know, I’d never seen that All-Stars promo video before. It was really… I was really touched. Thank you. I can’t believe you said all that and I never knew it,” Shane turned his head and saw Ilya duck his own head with a little laugh.

“They left out very important part,” Ilya replied.

“Really? What?”

“I said you are already better than everyone, *except me.* They left that part out.”

“What?! You said that in my All-Star promo video? That you’re better than me?!” Shane felt so affronted and yet so enamored by Ilya’s easy confidence and complete lack of humility.

“Guess they could not make me look bad before they give me the award,” Ilya said through his chuckles.

“Yeah, well. I know the truth about you,” Shane huffed and turned around to lean back against the railing, facing away from the skyline.

Ilya glanced at Shane with a twisted smile, “Da. Yes, you do.”

Shane blushed and bit his lip to stop his own smile from stretching too wide.

“Is Svetlana having a good time?” Shane asked, redirecting them.

“Oh yes,” Ilya rolled his eyes. “I am sure she will be in someone’s room, if she is not already. She doesn’t date hockey players, she says, but she fucks them.”

Shane laughed lightly, “Probably wise of her.”

Ilya nodded and they faded back into silence. Shane was about to muster the courage to ask Ilya about going down to his room, but Ilya spoke again.

“I will return to Russia tomorrow. Stop in New York, then Moscow.”

Shane nodded. He wasn’t surprised, but he was disappointed. He was dying to ask *why* Ilya was going back when he disliked his family so much. He wanted to know so much about Ilya that he still refused to share. And he wished Ilya would just stay in Ottawa for the summer. But more importantly…

“Do you… have you thought about my offer? To come to my family’s cottage in August?”

Ilya sighed this time, “I don't think I can, probably no. You know with my family, my father.”

“Of course,” Shane said, still not quite understanding *what* about his family would keep him there, but knowing better than to ask. “Well, it’s an open invitation, okay? If you are able to come. And it doesn’t have to mean anything between us, it can be just, you know, as friends.”

It pained Shane to say that, but if that’s what Ilya wanted and he’d still come visit…

Ilya looked at Shane with a kind of sad smile and said, “Thank you.”

Shane turned toward Ilya too, offering him a hopeful half-smile that he hoped said so many of the words Shane wasn’t brave enough to utter.

Please come to the cottage. You don’t have to be with your horrible family, you can be with me. Don’t you want to be together, just the two of us, for a whole week? Or longer? Maybe forever? I love you.

Instead of saying any of that, Shane inched closer and held Ilya’s gaze, which shifted from melancholy to heated. In an instant, Shane lost all restraint and grabbed Ilya by the back of the neck and pulled him down into a kiss. Ilya responded immediately and enthusiastically, hauling Shane to him and pushing Shane backward until he hit the wall next to the stairwell with an *oomph.*

The impact did nothing to interrupt them. Shane slid his tongue into Ilya's welcoming mouth and heard a low groan from Ilya's throat that only urged Shane on more, before he pulled back for a breath.

"We shouldn't be doing this here," Shane breathed.

"No," Ilya agreed, before descending on Shane's mouth again. "My room?"

"Yes, now please," Shane sighed.

"So eager, Hollander," Ilya grinned at him as he turned to walk toward the elevator bank.

"Shut up, you are," Shane grumbled.

"I am," Ilya said with a wink and Shane had to stop himself from tackling him to the ground right there. It had been over a month since he'd had his hands on Ilya, and the ride down to his floor felt like pure torture.

As soon as they were through the door, Ilya was pulling Shane's shirt out from the waistband of his pants, and Shane was trying to shove off Ilya's suit jacket. They fumbled in the dark room, tripping over each other until they made it to the bed. Shane was desperately impatient in his need to feel Ilya's skin on his, to have Ilya *inside* him.

Since that first time Ilya fucked Shane, he'd been hungry for it, aching for the feeling of being filled and fully consumed with Ilya in him, on him, *everywhere.* They reached the bed and Shane pushed Ilya back, insatiable now and unable to hold back from taking what he needed. Ilya let out a little grunt as he hit the mattress and then chuckled warmly.

"I am the eager one?" He teased.

"Oh my god, shut up and get your clothes off," Shane said as he pulled his shirt over his head.

"Hollander, I have never seen you like this," Ilya mused, lying on the bed with his clothes still on.

"It's been over a month since you went to Boston," Shane grumbled, now toeing off his shoes and following that with his pants.

Ilya sat up and stilled Shane with a hand on his hip.

“Have you not…?” Ilya asked, his tone soft and searching.

“No,” Shane whispered.

“Not even by yourself?” Ilya pressed.

Shane closed his eyes with a sigh of embarrassment and answered.

“No.”

The truth was that he hadn’t jerked off since Ilya left, because every time, all he could think about was Ilya. Ilya’s hands on him, the taste of Ilya’s dick, the feeling of Ilya shuddering his release while buried inside of him. And it made him too sad, knowing that it might never happen again. So sad that he stopped even trying. He had been so pathetically heartbroken that even getting a boner made him miserable.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya surged up and practically threw Shane onto the bed, looming over him as he ripped his own clothes off. “Take these off. Want to see all of you.”

Shane obeyed, lifting his hips and sliding off his briefs, eyes never leaving Ilya as he stripped down to nothing. His cock was hard and thick, curved slightly up toward his stomach and Shane licked his lips, hungry to feel it in his mouth.

“What do you want, Shane? How do you want me?” Ilya breathed as he stroked a large hand down his length a few times.

“I don’t know,” Shane said, overcome with need. “Everywhere, all of it, I don’t know.”

A smirk snaked its way across Ilya’s face, at once wicked and affectionate.

“Sit back,” Ilya instructed, and Shane did as he was told. Instead of joining Shane on the bed, Ilya went to his bag and fished out a small bottle of lube and a condom, the sight of which alone made Shane shudder with anticipation.

Ilya climbed onto the bed and loomed over Shane before pressing his warm, solid body down onto Shane’s and kissing him slow and deep. The weight of Ilya on him combined with the tender, sensual kiss calmed Shane’s heartbeat, which had been racing and frantic moments before. They stayed that way for a while, tongues sliding together and

breathing each other in before Ilya sat back on his calves and gazed down at Shane.

“Spread your legs,” Ilya said, voice gruff and throaty, as he squeezed some lube into his hand. Shane bent his knees and planted his feet wide, putting himself on display, silently begging Ilya to touch him — touch his dick, his balls, his hole, Shane didn’t care — he needed Ilya’s hands back on him.

“I missed you,” Ilya breathed. “So much, Shane.”

Shane felt himself flush, sure his whole body was turning pink. It had hurt that Ilya didn’t reciprocate when Shane told Ilya how much he missed him earlier. To hear it now, in this context, made Shane delirious with need.

“Touch me,” Shane practically begged. “Please. I miss you so much, I need you.”

Sliding closer to Shane on his knees, Ilya propped Shane’s thighs over his, spreading Shane even more. With one hand, he took Shane’s rigid cock lightly and began stroking. With his other hand, he used two lubed fingers to rub just under Shane’s balls, with intention but not too much pressure, and lube dripped down towards his hole. Shane let out a long breath, simultaneously soothed and set on fire by the feeling of Ilya’s powerful hand touching him so gently.

“Oh fuck, yes, oh my god,” Shane squeezed his eyes closed and pressed his head back into the pillows, trying not to come immediately. Ilya was pulling the most pathetic whines and moans out of Shane from the slightest touch. But he wasn’t capable of holding back, not when he felt this good.

When Shane composed himself enough to open his eyes, his breath hitched at the sight of Ilya over him. His arms flexed as he worked Shane with both hands. Shane’s eyes traveled down Ilya’s body to his thick length between them, only inches away from Shane’s and getting nudged by Ilya’s forearms as they moved.

“Ilya, please, stop, hold on,” Shane panted, “it’s too much. I don’t want—”

Shane trailed off, embarrassed that he was so close already. Ilya pulled his hand off Shane’s dick and moved it to his own, and Shane got impossibly harder at the sight, the way Ilya’s eyes fluttered closed at his own touch.

“Will you… ah… fuck me?”

Ilya nodded, “Yes. Need to feel you.”

Ilya had gradually been increasing the pressure on Shane’s perineum, and now he slid those fingers farther down to start circling Shane’s hole and Shane gasped. Even when he’d tried jerking off in the last month, he had never attempted to touch himself there again. He knew he was going to be tight, but Ilya had been relaxing Shane with his massage, and he easily slid one lubed finger inside.

“Mmmm, yeah,” Shane exhaled in pleasure. Even this slight penetration was so perfect and exactly what Shane needed.

“So tight, Shane,” Ilya breathed as he slowly pushed in a second finger. “Going to make me come so fast.”

“Fuck, please, Ilya.”

Ilya worked him open gently, taking his time and avoiding brushing his prostate, making Shane pant with impatience. Shane watched as Ilya’s fingers moved and stretched him, while his other hand lazily stroked his own cock. Shane was hypnotized by the simultaneous motions of Ilya’s beautiful hands.

He was ready to start begging when Ilya finally removed his fingers and grabbed the condom, and Shane whined at the loss. But Ilya’s solid thighs beneath his own kept Shane grounded, and he watched with hooded eyes as Ilya slid the condom onto his thick cock.

“Ready?” Ilya asked, always so cautious with Shane.

“Yes. Now. I need you,” Shane breathed.

“So eager,” Ilya huffed a laugh.

“I hate you,” Shane gritted his teeth with the intensity of his need.

“No you don’t,” Ilya smiled and then his features scrunched as he pushed the head of his cock into Shane’s desperate hole.

“Ahhhh, fuck, no, I don’t,” Shane laughed and moaned at the same time.

Ilya rocked slowly into him, lifting off his calves with each slight motion. When he bottomed out, fully inside Shane, he stopped to let Shane adjust.

“Missed this so much,” Shane whimpered, because he couldn’t stop himself. The words started pouring out of him as Ilya began rocking in and out of him again. “I didn’t want you to go. I… fuck… I don’t want you to go, Ilya.”

Shane was embarrassing himself, but something about the way Ilya was so tenderly fucking him was drawing the truth from his lips.

“I know,” Ilya panted, already starting to lose his breath. “I know.”

Ilya was pressing Shane’s knees up to his chest now as he began thrusting harder, letting out little grunts of effort and pleasure with every movement of his hips. He hooked his arms under Shane’s knees, making Shane gasp, and pushed Shane’s legs back as he leaned forward over him. Shane was practically bent in half, with his knees up near his shoulders, and the angle felt so overwhelmingly good, Shane thought he might come just like this, cock untouched.

“So good for me,” Ilya whispered against Shane’s lips. “Too good, Shane.”

He started speaking in Russian, and Shane savored the foreign yet beautiful sound of Ilya’s voice in his native tongue. And then Ilya kissed him, sloppy and wet and deep, and it was far too much sensation all at once. Shane’s orgasm erupted over him unexpectedly, jolting through him so intensely that he would have been yelling if Ilya’s mouth wasn’t covering his. He whimpered and moaned into Ilya’s mouth as Ilya pounded into him hard now, feeling his release splatter over his own chest, and riding the aftershocks with each thrust of Ilya’s throbbing cock into him. A minute later, Ilya stuttered and stilled, mouth hovering millimeters above Shane’s, his full wet lips shuddering with his sighs of pleasure as he spilled into Shane.

They stayed there, frozen in place, looking into each other’s eyes. Ilya’s hazel eyes bore into Shane, shifting from pleasure to fear, and Shane felt it. This was a goodbye fuck. Ilya would go to Moscow tomorrow. And when he came back, it would be like this had never happened.

Chapter End Notes

> I can't even express how grateful I am to everyone who has read and recommended this fic! It means so much to me, and I hope you're all happy with how I bring it to a close in the next few chapters! Your comments and kudos mean the world to me!!!

Chapter 20: Ilya Interlude #10

Chapter Notes

Content warning: homophobic slurs (they don't go unchallenged!)

I can't even begin to thank everyone for reading and being excited about this fic!!! I love this community so much! TY Pauppy for the very quick beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya had over nine hours on the flight to Moscow to think. He hated long flights like this, hated being so cooped up. Even in the luxury first class seat, his large frame was awkward and uncomfortable in a cramped space for so many hours. He tried listening to music and watching the in-flight movies, but his mind kept wandering back to Shane.

He knew he was fucking up. Every step of the way, he was fucking up.

He was supposed to be happy, he should be on top of the world right now. He'd just had a record-breaking season and capped it off with winning the Calder Trophy. His agent had already called him about new endorsement deals that would make him even more money, and he was sure others would be on the way.

But instead of celebrating, he was miserable. Heading back home to a family that didn't give a single fuck about him or his career — except for the money. And leaving behind the few people who actually cared about him.

Sergei Vetrov had helped him connect with an agent to find and furnish a condo that would be ready for him in Moscow, so at least he didn't have to sleep under his father's roof ever again. But Ilya would still have to see him and his brother, fulfill his family obligations without complaining, and keep his mouth shut. Ilya didn't know if he could do it.

Because now he knew it could be better. For the first time since his mom died, Ilya had felt seen, listened to, cared for. And it wasn't only Shane. The whole team had reached out to congratulate him, even Hayden. Ilya was part of something on the Centaurs, a team that seemed to genuinely care about each other and wanted each other to

succeed. It was all new to him.

With Shane, it was that and so much more. And what did he do? He led Shane on, used him, and kept him at arms length. And Shane still offered himself freely to Ilya. He wasn't even bitter about losing rookie of the year. What kind of humble bullshit was that?

Ilya wanted to say yes to Shane's invitation to his family's cottage. Because of course the Hollanders had a house on a lake, of course Shane spent his summers in some idyllic locale with his loving parents. If it was anything like Christmas at their home in Ottawa, it would be like something out of a terrible movie with a heartfelt lesson that Ilya would hate. But the reality… he might not hate the reality.

But the cost of being with Shane still felt too high. Ilya could handle sadness. He could tolerate loneliness and emotional isolation and a nagging sense of emptiness. He'd been doing that for years. Being vulnerable and risking the look of horror on Shane's face — the look Ilya had seen from the few friends he opened up to about his mother after she died — that was too much of a risk. He'd rather Shane hate him for breaking his heart than pity him.

So before he left Las Vegas, after they'd fucked and showered, he told Shane that it was the last time. That they needed to be responsible. That they should just be friends.

The problem was that Ilya couldn't stay away. Even halfway across the world, Shane was always on his mind. He found himself wanting to tell Shane things, send him funny videos he saw, tell him about his summer training with other Russian NHL players back in town, or even just ask what he was doing at that moment. Whatever popped into his head, his next thought was always Shane. And despite the awkward way they left things, Shane always replied. And then he started texting Ilya too.

***

Ilya: scored 2 goals on kuznetsov today

Shane: nice. he's such a dick.

Ilya: he thinks you should have won the calder

Shane: oh. nvm, love that guy

Ilya: 😶

***

Shane: ur missing the best time of year in ottawa

Shane:

Ilya: is also best time in moscow

Ilya:

***

Shane: did you see that ricci was traded to vancouver?

Ilya: no!

Ilya: will miss taking his money in poker

Shane: looks like we're getting pete hofford and a couple draft picks

Ilya: did not think ricci was worth that

Shane: ur an ass

Ilya: yes

***

Ilya:

Ilya: mcdonald's better in russia

Shane: since its garbage everywhere, sure

Ilya: don't lie. you love mcdonald's.

Shane: 🙂

***

Almost a month after he'd returned to Moscow, Ilya was expected at some Ministry police commendation ceremony for his brother, and it would be the first time he would see Andrei and his father since returning to Moscow. He'd very easily been able to avoid them with the excuse of hockey training and not wanting to see them at all. But he'd never hear the end of it if he didn't show up, dressed properly and hair combed, to see his brother get this award he likely paid for with a bribe or illegal favor.

He was dreading it so much that he had been ignoring Shane's texts.

He couldn't think about Shane right now. He couldn't be laughing about some cute thing he said while in the Ministry building, it just felt wrong.

"Look who's not too good for us anymore," Andrei said as he approached Ilya after the ceremony.

Ilya had stayed in the back, not even bothering to go sit next to his father, and now they were both walking towards him.

"Hello Father. Andrei. Congratulations. I'm sure you did a lot to deserve this," Ilya said with a fake smile.

"This is what you wear to your brother's ceremony?" His father asked, foregoing a real greeting. He was as tall as Ilya, with short-cropped grey hair and broad shoulders that were looking a little more slumped than Ilya remembered. But he still looked intimidating in his uniform and regalia. Andrei next to him looked like a pale imitation.

"Sorry, sir." Ilya hated to apologize — he looked great, he thought, in a button down and trousers — but it was an automatic response from childhood he'd yet to break.

"I told you, he's too good for us now, this must be beneath him," Andrei scowled over at Ilya. Well, he wasn't wrong.

"Not at all," Ilya lied. "Now you have two award-winning sons." He plastered that fake smile back on his face.

"What award did you win?" his father asked, and Ilya's blood boiled. Had his father really forgotten that Ilya just won rookie of the year, or did he really not care? Either way, fuck him.

"Nevermind," Ilya closed his eyes with a steadying breath before he talked back and said something to embarrass himself in public. "I will see you at the house for dinner."

Before he could leave, another man walked up to Ilya with a big smile on his face, and clapped both Ilya and Andrei on the shoulders. Ilya vaguely recognized him, but couldn't be bothered to remember his name or position.

"Grigori Rozanov," the man boomed, "You must be so proud, two accomplished sons!"

"Yes, thank you," Ilya's father straightened up and his face twisted

into what might be considered a smile, if Ilya thought him capable of it. “Andrei’s service is to be commended.”

“And Ilya here,” the other man pointed at him. “Rookie of the year in the NHL! Doing Russia proud.”

“Of course, of course. If only he had stayed here and played in the KHL,” his father gave him a sidelong glance and Ilya simply nodded, gritting his teeth.

“Largest contract for a Russian rookie in NHL history, did you know?” Andrei piped in, crass as always. Money was the only thing any of these people cared about.

The conversation continued and Ilya’s mind wandered. As they left the building, he pulled out a cigarette and couldn’t help but think about what Shane would have to say about that.

Coach would be pissed. You’re going to die of lung cancer. It smells awful, go brush your teeth before you kiss me.

Ilya’s heart clenched, and as if summoned by his thoughts, his phone buzzed with a notification.

Shane: *haven’t heard from you in a couple days. hope ur ok.*

Fuck, Ilya missed him. But he didn’t reply.

At dinner, Ilya mostly stayed quiet while his father and brother gossiped about Ministry people and his step-mother Polina silently served them. Somehow, though, the conversation came back around to hockey.

“Will be surprised if Ilya makes the Olympic team at this point,” Andrei said, clearly goading him. Ilya took the bait.

“I will be captain of the team,” Ilya scoffed. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“They will prefer a player who stayed in Russia. Someone loyal,” his father chimed in.

“All the best Russian players are in the NHL,” Ilya rolled his eyes. “And I am the best of all of them.”

“You should be more humble, don’t get cocky. You are young, you could get hurt tomorrow,” his father continued.

“Either way, Russia will definitely beat Canada next Olympics, with their little faggy star Hollander as captain,” Andrei laughed.

“What did you say?” Ilya clenched his fist around his fork and snapped his head to his brother.

“Oh right, he’s your little friend, isn’t he?” Andrei laughed and took a swig from the glass of wine in front of him, face getting red with intoxication.

“He’s my teammate,” Ilya said through gritted teeth. “And he’s an incredible hockey player.”

“I’m sure he’s an incredible cocksucker too, doesn’t mean I’d want anything to do with him,” Andrei chuckled.

“Shut the fuck up, right now,” Ilya seethed.

“Language, Ilya,” was his father’s only interjection.

“Why, is he your boyfriend? Got him on his knees in the locker rooms like you used to with Nikolai?”

Ilya shot out of his seat, heart pounding and fork still clenched in his hands.

“Whoa, he *is*, isn’t he?” Andrei was laughing meanly still, and Ilya had to use all his restraint to not punch him right there.

“Ilya, sit down, behave yourself,” his father droned, eyes down at his plate.

“No,” Ilya slammed the fork down. “Fuck this. Fuck you,” he spat at Andrei.

And without another word, he stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

> happy heated rivalry montreal premiere day. i'm not sad or bitter about being stuck at home in the slightest, why would i be?
>
> FOUR DAYS!!!

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Did someone say cottage?

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE! There's a short section of this chapter that is taken directly from chapter 24 of Heated Rivalry. Those lines are italicized, and I added lines in Shane's POV because the scene is originally from Ilya's POV.

This was supposed to be the last long chapter, but it got so long and I didn't want to cut any of it, so it's not! But I have added a final chapter count and we're getting close, friends

My eternal gratitude to Nico, Paupy, and dntat for being as invested in this universe as I am!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shane? Are you out here?”

His mom poked her head out the back door and called out over the deck into the back yard.

“Yeah, I’m over here.” He leaned over the edge of the hammock and waved to her.

“Oh, good, I thought you had left but your car was still here.” She started walking his way.

Shane was spending a couple of days at his parents’ house while movers were getting all his stuff into his new apartment. It felt so weird sleeping in his old bedroom, and he wanted to tell his dad to turn it into the home office he’d always said he wanted. He just felt like such a kid being here. It was a feeling he was desperate to escape, but it kept chasing him. He was excited to get into his new apartment and finally live alone.

“Nope, I’m just reading,” Shane lied, holding up the book he hadn’t opened since he got out here.

It was a gorgeous summer morning, with a light breeze and a few

clouds in the sky, and Shane wanted to soak up as much of it as he could. He spent so much time inside rinks and gyms and hotels and cars and planes, that in the summer he really tried to be outside as much as he could. Running in the park and along the Ottawa river, barbequing with his family, getting occasional drinks with Hayden and other friends in town on patio bars, and reading in his favorite spot — the hammock in his parents' back yard.

But the book hadn't held his attention at all, not when Ilya hadn't texted him back for two days. It was unusual; they'd gotten into a steady texting rhythm over the last two weeks, even with the time difference. Shane loved waking up to a string of texts in the morning and sending a bunch for Ilya to find when he woke up. Shane had expected Ilya to pull back again after he told Shane they should just be friends. But it seemed like he really did want to maintain their friendship, and Shane was enjoying the companionship even from afar — even when he still longed for more.

His mom approached and Shane sat up, hanging his legs over the edge of the hammock.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Nothing, really. Just checking in. Can I sit?" She gestured to one of the lawn chairs nearby and Shane nodded.

She turned the chair to face him. "How're you doing, sweetie?"

Her face was all soft concern and Shane wanted to roll his eyes. He wished she would just ask whatever she really wanted to ask.

"I'm fine, mom. Why? Do I not seem fine?"

"Well, no, you seem perfectly fine. Just maybe… a little down the last couple of days. I thought you were excited about getting your own place."

"I am," Shane answered honestly. "I liked living with Hayden, but yeah… definitely feel like it'll be better alone. He's great, but so messy. And with Jackie there all the time… yeah. It'll be good to have my own space."

"Well, good. So, is it something else? Are you still disappointed about not winning rookie of the year?"

"God mom, no, I'm fine, I swear." He leaned over to check his phone,

thinking he felt a vibration, but he must have imagined it.

“And… is everything good with you and Ilya?” She pressed on tentatively, apparently determined to get an answer out of Shane. He bit his bottom lip and felt his cheeks get warm, wishing she’d leave it alone, but also wishing he could spill his guts and tell her everything.

“Yeah, uh, sure. Why wouldn’t it be? He’s… you know, he’s in Russia, so…” Shane didn’t really know what to say.

“I know, but I know you’ve been texting a lot, right? That’s nice, that you’re keeping in touch.”

“Oh. Yeah. We have.” *How did she know that?*

“And everything between you two is… good?” She pressed again.

“Mom, yes. Why? What are you trying to say?” Shane knew what she was trying to say. His mom was smart and perceptive, and she knew him really well. He was sure she at least had suspicions about his feelings for his teammate.

“Shane,” she sighed. “If you don’t want to tell me anything, that’s fine. But it does seem like *something* is up, and you’ve been checking your phone *a lot*.”

Shane took a few seconds to reply, but said, “I haven’t heard from him for a few days. I guess I’m just… worried.”

“Worried that something happened to him?”

“Maybe… or… I don’t know, worried that he doesn’t want to talk to me anymore.”

“Oh Shane, I doubt that very much. You guys are so close, I’m sure he’s just busy,” she said reassuringly, placing a supportive hand on Shane’s knee.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Is there… and you don’t have to tell me or say anything, but I’m here to listen if you want to…” she started.

Shane’s stomach clenched. He was so petrified of what she might ask next, but also, deep down, wanted her to ask it.

“Is there something going on between you boys? Beyond, you know…

friendship?"

Shane ducked his head, sure he was red as a tomato now. And that probably gave away enough to let her know the answer.

"I don't really know, mom." He finally looked up at her with sad eyes, finding a comforting gaze looking back. "Sort of? I thought there was. I wanted there to be… but there just can't be."

"Oh honey," her hand was back on his knee. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"Thanks mom. But you know… it's just impossible, with our careers. And I don't think he wants that, either. Not the way I do. He just wants to be my friend. And that's what I should want too."

"You can't help who you love, Shane," his mom offered with the wisdom of someone who knew. "I fell in love with a Centaurs fan — and I'm from Montreal."

Shane laughed, appreciating both the levity *and* grave seriousness with which she meant it.

"I don't know if love is the word…" Shane lied again. It *was* the word. "But I get what you mean."

"And there are plenty of wonderful men out there who would be lucky to have you," she said, in classic mom fashion.

"Yeah, well… I think I'll probably be on my own for a long time if I want to stay in the NHL," Shane dropped his gaze again. "But thank you. You're right."

"I won't lie and say it's going to be easy, but Shane — you deserve to find love, and the NHL doesn't have a say in that. Your dad and I will always support you, and I don't want you to feel like you can't live a full life, okay?"

Shane squeezed his eyes closed, trying to hold back the tears. He loved his mom for saying that, but how was he supposed to date men and be the face of the league? But he took a deep breath and said, "Thanks, mom. I dunno what I'll do, but… thank you."

"Would a mom hug help?" she asked, standing.

Shane huffed a laugh and struggled out of the hammock, letting his

mom wrap her arms around him.

“I’m very proud of you Shane. And I’m sure you and Ilya will figure it out.” She patted him on the shoulders and looked up at him with a soft smile. Shane smiled back and took a deep breath. He wished he could believe that they would figure it out, but he really didn’t know.

As they separated, Shane’s phone buzzed — he wasn’t imagining it this time. He sucked in a breath and spun around to grab it, his mom chuckling as she walked back into the house.

Ilya: can we talk?

Shane: like on the phone?

Ilya: yes

Shane: yes. whenever.

Ilya: in 20 minutes?

Shane: sure. call me then.

Shane scrambled. He didn’t know where to put himself. Should he stay here? Should he leave his parents house? Should he shower?

He can’t smell you through the phone, idiot.

He decided to go to the park down the street, telling his parents he wanted to go for a run, but really just needed some space to breathe while he waited for this phone call. Shane had no idea why Ilya would be calling him. Their text exchanges had been fun, but never anything beyond surface level chatting. And after not hearing from Ilya for a couple days, Shane was surprised and a little concerned that something actually was wrong.

When the phone finally rang, Shane stared at Ilya’s name on the screen for several seconds before answering.

“Hello?”

“Shane.”

Ilya sounded relieved, and Shane felt that relief too — down to his bones.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Um… I don’t think we’ve ever talked on the phone before.” Shane chuckled awkwardly.

“No. You are right. First time.”

What the hell is this about? Is what Shane wanted to ask.

“So… what’s up?”

“Can I still come to your cottage?”

*Oh my god. Oh my **god.***

Shane stopped walking along the path, shocked into stillness.

“Yes! Of course! Yes, please come!”

“Yes?” Ilya sounded so tentative, more nervous than Shane had ever heard him.

“Oh my god, Ilya, *yes.*”

“Okay.”

He started walking again, faster now, filled with excited energy.

“I’ll be there with my parents in two weeks, and then two weeks after that, they’ll leave and it’ll just be me. So you can come whenever. They’d love to see you, but also… you know… might be nice to have time alone?”

Shane knew he shouldn’t be hoping for what he was hoping for, or even suggesting it, after Ilya said they should just be friends. But he’d never expected this to happen, and he couldn’t stop his mind from immediately wandering to what he so desperately dreamed of doing with Ilya, alone, in his favorite place in the world.

“I can be there by August 15, I think.” Ilya said. Shane nearly did a happy dance.

“Oh, um, yeah, my parents will be gone by then.”

“Good.”

*Good? **Good?***

Oh god, Shane wanted too much.

“If you fly into Ottawa, it’s about a two-hour drive. I can, um, text you the address and directions and stuff.”

“Good.” Ilya repeated, and Shane could hear the smile in his voice.

“Great.”

“Thank you, Shane.”

***

Shane paced the living room of the cottage, knowing Ilya should be there any minute and unable to be calm about it *at all.* He had flown into Ottawa the night before and stopped at his apartment to pack and get his car, and now it was about 1pm, when he’d texted Shane he should be there. But what if there had been traffic? What if Ilya had gotten in an accident?

No. That was not productive thinking. Ilya was going to be here in a few minutes and then… then what?

He’d been playing the scenario over and over in his head the last three weeks, and he couldn’t land on exactly what he wanted. He definitely wanted to kiss Ilya. If he was totally honest with himself, he wanted to drag Ilya to his bedroom and keep him in bed for at least 24 hours. But they were just friends now, and Shane needed to remember that.

He’d brought his PlayStation from his apartment along with a bunch of movies, he’d made sure the kayaks were clean and ready to use, he’d stocked up the kitchen with snacks and drinks and even some food to cook, and he’d made sure the extra bedroom had clean sheets on the bed. He’d also gone a little crazy and had some workout equipment delivered before he arrived to turn the basement into a gym, because he’d never spent this long here during the summer, and he couldn’t stop his training routine for over a month.

So maybe today they’d just hang out and play video games, and tomorrow they could swim in the lake, workout, and maybe go on a hike. Shane really wanted to take Ilya into the small town about 20 minutes away to stop at the pizza and ice cream spots his family visited every summer.

There was something exciting about the thought of bringing Ilya to these places that Shane had never shared with anyone else. The

thought of it made him shiver with anticipation, and he ran his hand through his hair for probably the hundredth time in the last few minutes. Anxious excitement pulsed through his veins and he could feel his heart slamming in his chest.

Just when he thought he might as well sit back down and try to relax, there was a knock on the door and Shane jumped, then froze. Oh shit. This was it. Ilya was here. Fuck.

Ilya is here.

Shane took a deep breath and opened the door. And there he was. Tall and broad, golden brown curls spilling out of a backwards cap, and a tentative smile on his face. He looked so fucking good, Shane nearly tackled him right in the doorway and straddled him. His sparkling hazel eyes were questioning and uncertain, and Shane wanted to wipe all that uncertainty away. He needed to stay calm and remember that they were just friends now.

“You’re here,” Shane said, and it came out in a raspy whisper.

“I am here,” Ilya nodded, smile growing into something warm, uncertainty fading away.

“Um, well, you should come in,” Shane stepped back from the door, letting Ilya pass him and walk in. He dropped his duffel bag next to the door, toeing off his shoes next to it, and walked into the living room, looking around.

“Wow,” Ilya said with a smirk, taking in the wood-paneled walls and ceiling, rustic lake-themed decor, and plaid sofas around the fireplace. “Very Canada in here.”

“We *are* in Ontario,” Shane replied with affectionate irritation in his voice, walking across the room.

“Yes, we are.” Ilya turned to him, smile now stretching broad across his face. Ilya was stunning all the time, but when he smiled like that, it felt like getting slammed hard into the boards — it knocked the breath out of Shane.

“So, I can give you the tour, it’s not that big, or we can go out to see the lake, or — are you hungry? I got a ton of food, or we could go get pizza in town, or…”

Shane’s voice trailed off as Ilya walked towards him, grin turning

mischievous. Shane swallowed hard and he instinctively backed up when Ilya approached, which made Ilya chuckle and start crowding Shane until his back hit the wall next to the fireplace.

“Wha - what are you doing?” Shane stammered, looking up at Ilya.

“What do you think?”

“I mean… I thought… you just want to be friends?” Shane started to tremble as he spoke, because Ilya was brushing the hair off of his forehead with one hand, and grabbing his hip with the other.

“Friends…” Ilya hummed. “Yes. We are friends.”

Shane huffed a laugh as Ilya’s hand drifted from his hair to cup his face. “Um… seems like this isn’t something friends should be doing.”

Ilya looked contemplative for a moment, then said, “Hmmm. I do not care.”

Before Shane could ask what the fuck he was talking about, Ilya was pressing his lips to Shane’s and all other thoughts left his mind. Shane was transported back to their very first disastrous kiss in Ilya’s kitchen, and he melted into Ilya exactly how he had then, letting Ilya’s big arms swallow him up in an encompassing embrace. Ilya licked his tongue across Shane’s lips, making him whimper embarrassingly as he opened for him, Ilya’s tongue warm and deliciously familiar as it invaded his mouth.

They made out like that for what felt like hours but might just have been a minute or two — Shane pressed against the wall, Ilya holding him in place with a firm hand on his hip and another in his hair, alternating between long slow swipes of his tongue deep in Shane’s mouth and light nibbles at his swollen lips. Shane was powerless to do anything but take it all and try to keep up, fighting against the way his knees weakened and tried to buckle under the overwhelming rush of need that surged through him.

When Ilya finally pulled back — only by an inch, resting his forehead against Shane’s — he kept his eyes closed and breathed heavily, still grasping onto Shane like a lifeline.

“Ilya…” Shane whispered. “I…”

“I know,” Ilya whispered in return. “Shane, I know.”

“You know?”

“I fucked up. Fucked this up.”

And he was kissing Shane again, softer and sweeter, pouring out his apology with delicate sips from Shane’s mouth, moving across his jaw and kissing up to Shane’s ear, making him shiver. Ilya finally released his vice-like grip on Shane’s hip and started directing them towards the couch, still not taking his mouth from Shane’s skin for more than a split second. Shane yelped lightly when his calves hit the couch and he fell back with a thump. Ilya grinned rakishly at him while sinking to his knees between Shane’s legs, and all Shane could do was stare open-mouthed, lips still wet.

Ilya pushed two strong hands up Shane’s legs, fingers spread and almost stretching the full width of Shane’s thighs. He pushed up under the loose fabric of his basketball shorts, rubbing his thumbs across the soft skin of Shane’s inner thighs, and Shane’s chest heaved with the heady anticipation of Ilya in front of him, looking up at him with hungry eyes.

Shane bit his lower lip into his mouth to stop himself from asking Ilya all the questions rocketing through his mind, knowing they’d have plenty of time to talk. He desperately wanted to know what the hell Ilya was thinking, what had changed his mind, why he was *here.* Here in Ontario and on his knees in front of Shane and licking his lips. But Shane was painfully hard now, and he needed Ilya’s hands or mouth on him like he needed to take his next breath — he’d die without it.

Like he was reading Shane’s mind, Ilya pulled his hands out of Shane’s shorts and moved to his waistband, tugging lightly and nodding his chin to get Shane to lift his hips. Shane did, not taking his eyes off Ilya as he dragged his shorts and boxer briefs down to his ankles and made room for Shane to kick them off. Shane’s mind briefly wandered, wondering if they should move to his bedroom, because this was his parents’ couch after all.... But then Ilya’s tongue was hot and wet and sliding up his cock, and all other thoughts were wiped away.

“Oh fuck,” Shane moaned when Ilya took the head of his cock into his mouth and trailed his tongue back and forth over his slit.

“Dripping for me already, Hollander,” Ilya teased while he stroked a hand lightly over Shane’s length.

“No I’m not,” Shane huffed, not sure why he was embarrassed. Ilya obviously *knew* how Shane reacted to him after their months of

hookups.

“You are,” Ilya purred and swiped his thumb over the slit his tongue had just been teasing, drawing out a bead of precum *and* another whimper from Shane’s lips.

“Fine,” Shane breathed, “I am. Will you please do something about it now?”

Ilya chuckled, “Da. Okay, since you ask so nicely.”

Shane rolled his eyes and mid-eyeroll sucked in a breath as Ilya finally took his cock fully in his mouth and started a slow rhythm. Ilya held eye contact with Shane, whose lips were slightly parted in awe of the sight before him. He had not been expecting this at all, and to have Ilya so gently and sweetly sucking his dick within 10 minutes of arriving was making his head spin. Or maybe it was the blowjob, which was so fucking good. Had Ilya always been this good at this? Oh fuck, *he had*, and Shane had just gone far too long without it.

Ilya’s plush lips lingered on the head of Shane’s cock, suckling lightly in a way that made Shane feel like every single nerve ending in his body was in that one spot and he fucking *whined* with the intensity of it, pleasure bordering on pain. Suddenly, he was on the verge of orgasm, and he didn’t want it to end, but he didn’t want Ilya to stop — he just let the feeling of ecstasy take over.

“I’m… shit, I’m coming,” Shane breathed before his hips jerked and he was spilling into Ilya’s mouth. Ilya moaned around him, taking him deep and swallowing every bit of Shane’s release, and continuing to suckle lightly until Shane whined with overstimulation.

Pulling off Shane’s cock with one last lap of his tongue, Ilya looked dazed and so happy, possibly more free and easy than Shane had ever seen him. Except maybe that day on the beach after the All-Star game.

“Get up here,” Shane demanded, pulling on Ilya’s arms until he climbed onto the couch and Shane lay back with Ilya on top of him, finally claiming his mouth again.

Ilya’s tongue tasted like the salty bitterness of Shane’s release, and it was strangely like a breath of fresh air, a visceral reminder of this intimacy that Shane had been missing and longing for. Ilya’s heavy weight pressing him into the couch felt the same — so did the press of his hard dick against Shane’s thigh. They kissed, unhurried and sweet.

Shane sank his hands into Ilya's hair and knocked his hat to the ground, then snaked a hand down between them to squeeze Ilya through his joggers.

Ilya groaned into Shane's mouth and Shane smiled so big that they had to break the kiss.

"Miss me?" Shane asked with another squeeze of his hand.

"Yes," Ilya replied, his breath tickling Shane's neck and his hips pressing into Shane's hand, seeking more pressure. "Has been so long."

"Mmm," Shane hummed, taking Ilya's mouth again, then pulling away abruptly. "Wait, it's been so long? You haven't been with anyone since…?"

Ilya cut him off with a kiss and Shane laughed lightly into his mouth.

"I was trying to say something," Shane complained with a giggle.

"Say something later," Ilya practically growled. "If you do not touch my cock right now I will die."

Shane laughed fully now, and realized he was getting hard again already. He gently pushed Ilya up off of him and said, "Come with me. Let's go to my room." He pulled his shorts back on and grabbed Ilya's hand.

It took them a while to actually get to Shane's bedroom, because Ilya kept pulling him into kisses. They finally made it to the bed, still dressed, but wrapped around each other, Shane's hand down Ilya's shorts and wrapped around his cock, stroking slowly. Ilya's hands were massaging Shane's ass — and Shane had a horrifying realization.

"Shit," he cursed.

"What? Something wrong?"

"I don't… this is so stupid. I didn't expect you to want to do this, so I… I don't have any lube."

Ilya laughed, forehead hitting Shane's shoulder as he shook. "You scared me. Is fine, I have in my bag."

"You brought lube to my parents' cottage?" Shane asked, incredulous.

“Of course. Am coming to stay with you for two weeks and you think I will not bring lube?” Ilya retorted, equally incredulous.

More laughter bubbled out of Shane, and he sighed, “Well, you better go get it.”

Ilya grumbled into Shane’s neck, squeezing him tightly, “Do not want to move.”

“Do you want to fuck me?” Shane countered, and Ilya was on his feet in an instant, practically sprinting to the living room to get his bag.

Shane took the moment alone to grin up at the ceiling, still not quite believing that this was happening. He’d mentally prepared for two weeks of friend activities and being in pure agony with the need to kiss Ilya. But Ilya had just stormed in and trampled on that plan, and Shane was not fully processing it yet.

Ilya returned with a triumphant grin and a bottle of lube, which he tossed onto the bed. Shane propped himself up on his elbows to watch as Ilya pulled off his t-shirt, grateful for the opportunity to admire his broad chest, tapered waist, and the trail of hair leading into his shorts. But what was that on his chest?

“You got a tattoo?!” Shane jumped up to get a closer look at the ink on the skin of Ilya’s left pec, just above his heart.

“Ah. Yes,” Ilya said a little sheepishly, looking down at his chest.

Shane stepped closer and ran his fingers over the tattoo. It was a stylized portrait of a young woman, wearing what looked like traditional Russian clothing, with an eagle perched on her shoulder. Below her feet were words in the Russian alphabet. It was beautiful.

“What does it mean? Who is that?” Shane asked, almost reverently, continuing to trail his fingers over Ilya’s chest, transfixed by this change to the skin he was so familiar with.

Ilya swallowed hard and Shane watched his Adam’s apple bob.

“Shane,” Ilya stilled Shane with a hand over his, exhaling slowly. “Will tell you later. Now, need you to touch my cock or I will explode.”

Shane chuckled, “You’re always so impatient.”

“Has been over a month,” Ilya whined. “And you are most impatient ever.” He pulled Shane’s hand up off his chest and punctuated his sentence with a kiss to Shane’s palm, before walking ahead to drag Shane to the bed and shove him back on it.

Shane pushed himself back until his head was on the pillow and Ilya scrambled on top of him and descended onto Shane’s mouth with hungry kisses. Shane was so overcome with giddiness and arousal, it took him a couple of minutes to process what Ilya had just said.

“Wait a minute,” Shane gasped, as Ilya nuzzled into his neck and pressed wet kisses there.

“Hmmm?” Ilya didn’t stop kissing and nuzzling.

“You said it’s been over a month,” Shane sighed into the feeling of Ilya’s mouth on his earlobe.

“Yes. Since Vegas.”

“Ilya,” Shane pulled Ilya’s face toward his so their noses almost touched. “Do you mean it’s been a month since *we’ve* been together, or do you mean…” Shane had tried to ask this earlier and needed to know. “Do you mean you haven’t been with *anyone* since Vegas?”

Ilya pulled his lips between his teeth and closed his eyes. Without opening them he said softly, “With anyone. Since Vegas.”

“Fuck, Ilya,” Shane whispered, shocked.

Ilya still didn’t open his eyes, just nodded and nuzzled back into Shane’s neck, but Shane needed more and he needed it now. He surged up and flipped them, landing with his legs straddling Ilya’s hips. He leaned back to yank down the waistband of Ilya’s sweats and pull out his dick, which was solid and thick in his hand. Despite having sent Ilya to grab the lube, Shane suddenly wanted nothing more than to make Ilya come with his hands and watch him unravel.

He stroked hard and fast, and Ilya grasped both of Shane’s thighs tightly, breathing hard.

“Fuck, Shane, oh fuck,” Ilya threw his head back and bucked his hips sharply into Shane’s grip.

“I can’t believe you fucking left me like that,” Shane breathed, feeling a surge of anger. “Told me we had to be just friends. And then you

didn't even fuck anyone in Russia? And you show up here, all over me? What the fuck, Ilya?"

Ilya didn't answer, he just writhed under Shane and breathed shallow, desperate breaths, looking like he was trying as hard as he could to not come immediately. Shane upped the ante, wanting to see Ilya come hard, not letting him savor it. He used his other hand to cradle Ilya's balls and tug them a little, the way Ilya had done to Shane multiple times that left him a whimpering mess. Ilya's head snapped up, eyes on Shane's hands working him over, lips swollen from kissing and biting and slightly parted.

"Gonna… come…" He breathed.

"Do it, come on," Shane urged on, voice raspy, nearly as gone as Ilya was.

Ilya's whole body contracted with the power of his orgasm, release splashing up to hit his chest and stomach, and Shane continued his relentless pace, wringing out every bit of pleasure, every last drop of release, until Ilya whimpered, "Stop, stop," with a hand stilling Shane's.

They stayed like that, Shane straddling Ilya, both panting heavily, and holding each other's gaze for a long moment.

A smile slowly crept over Shane's face as he looked down at Ilya, bare-chested and splattered in cum, lying in this bed that he'd been sleeping in every summer since he was 7 or 8, hit with the surrealness of it all.

"I'm sorry," Ilya finally said, stroking his arms up Shane's thighs. "It was… I was... I do not know… was scared." He paused, and Shane let the silence linger. "Still am scared," Ilya said very quietly, and all of Shane's simmering anger disappeared.

He pulled off his shirt, and wordlessly used it to wipe up the mess on Ilya's stomach and chest, then pull his waistband back up. Ilya watched him with a bemused look. Then he shifted off of Ilya and draped himself over his chest, leaning up to kiss him softly — once, then twice.

"I'm scared too," Shane whispered. "But I'm so glad you're here."

"Me too," Ilya smiled sweetly, wrapping his arms around Shane. And they drifted off into a sated sleep.

They awoke to a dark room, with the sun almost below the horizon, then spent the evening eating some frozen lasagna Shane's mom left behind, watching movies, and cuddling on the couch. When it came time to go to bed, Shane hesitated, not sure if he should be expecting Ilya to share his bed. But Ilya just carried his suitcase in behind Shane, plopped it in front of the dresser, and fished out his toothbrush. Shane suppressed a grin as they got ready for bed together and climbed under the covers, Ilya pulling Shane close and falling asleep almost immediately. Shane lay awake a while longer, not quite as tired as jet-lagged Ilya, and buzzing with the completely unexpected events of the day.

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Shane woke early and let Ilya rest a little longer while he went for a run, and when he got back, Ilya had coffee brewing and eggs sizzling on the stove.

"Sorry for finding all the things in the kitchen, but thought it might be nice?" he asked, adorably tentative.

"Yeah, make yourself at home, really. This is awesome" Shane nodded, delighted at the sight of Ilya cooking in this familiar kitchen. "I'm starving."

So they ate breakfast together, then went for a bike ride to a hiking trail — Ilya made do with a slightly too-small bike, with Shane laughing as his knees hit his arms — before coming back to have lunch on the dock and then go swimming in the lake.

When the sun was low in the sky, Ilya showered while Shane made them sandwiches for dinner, which they ate on the deck overlooking the lake. It was so serene and beautiful, and Shane still couldn't quite believe that Ilya was here, just sitting next to him eating a turkey sandwich. He had a million questions about what Ilya was even doing here, but he was cautious after the last time he'd asked Ilya for details about his life.

"So," Shane started, setting his plate on the glass top table in front of him and turning to Ilya. "How was your flight from Moscow? You haven't really told me much about the trip."

Ilya huffed a laugh. "How was my flight? This is what you ask me?"

"I mean… yeah? Isn't that a normal question?"

“Sure,” Ilya shrugged. “Was fine.”

Ilya set his plate down too, and leaned back onto the couch, stretching his arm out on the back, which Shane took as an invitation. He shifted over until his shoulder was snuggled into the side of Ilya’s chest, and Ilya’s hand draped around over his shoulder. He heard Ilya sigh contentedly and Shane’s heart flip-flopped with happiness. They sat there for a minute or two, sipping their beers and watching the sun begin to set, until Ilya took a breath and spoke.

“Are you not going to ask me why I am here? What happened in Russia?”

“Oh,” Shane said with a confused tilt of his head. “I figured you wouldn’t want to talk about it.”

“Ah,” Ilya nodded.

“So, yeah… you don’t have to,” Shane said, desperately wanting to know, but not wanting to ruin Ilya’s visit when he’d just gotten here.

“We can,” Ilya shrugged. As if this very thing hadn’t been the source of so much mental anguish for Shane these last few months.

“Okay…” Shane replied, waiting, but Ilya said nothing, so Shane sighed and said, “Are you going to talk?”

“You did not ask me,” Ilya shrugged.

“You’re such a dick,” Shane rolled his eyes and lightly elbowed Ilya in the stomach, which earned him a kiss on the temple.

“Ilya, why are you here? What happened in Russia?” Shaned asked over-dramatically.

“Great question,” Ilya chuckled. “I do not really feel like talking about it.”

“Fuck you, I’m going inside,” Shane moved to get up, over this game.

“Noooo, stay, stay,” Ilya yanked Shane back. “I will answer.”

“You better,” Shane grumbled.

Ilya sighed, and Shane waited. After a long beat, Ilya spoke.

“My family — I told you they are not great, yes? My father and

brother, they are the same. Both cops, both very old fashioned, they care about money and looking good to the right people. Do not give a fuck about me."

"Ilya… I'm so sorry," Shane turned to look at him, but Ilya shook his head slightly, like he couldn't say this with Shane looking at him. "Sorry. Keep going."

"So I go to this ceremony for my brother, some stupid police award I am sure he bribed to get. My father is so proud, so happy for him. But he says nothing about rookie of the year. Says I should be playing for Russian league. And Andrei… fuck Andrei. Said even more horrible things, I cannot even repeat."

Another long beat passed, and Shane sunk further into Ilya, who was now running his fingers through Shane's hair in a soothing rhythm that Shane suspected was soothing Ilya as much as it was him.

"And so, I realize. Fuck them. I do not have to deal with them. I can be here, where it is good and boring and Canadian."

Shane laughed at that.

"Maybe boring is okay, sometimes, you know?" Ilya asked, sounding like he was trying to convince himself.

"First of all, it's not boring here, Ilya," Shane couldn't help but protest. "We have tons of stuff to do, and look how beautiful it is, and —"

Ilya cut Shane off with a quick kiss.

"And I also realize, I am stupid."

"I could have told you that."

"Shush. I realize I am stupid because you are here, and you are *not* horrible, and why the fuck am I not here with you?"

Shane turned his whole body to face Ilya, no longer bothering to hold back the giant smile that was squishing his cheeks up into crinkled eyes.

"Yeah, that was pretty stupid of you," Shane said through his smug smile.

"Yeah, well, do not gloat so much, I still can leave," Ilya huffed.

“You’re not going to leave, though,” Shane pushed himself up and swung a leg over Ilya’s lap. “You want to be here with me. You know I…” Shane stopped himself mid-sentence and altered course before he said too much. “You know I want you here and you love it.”

Shane knew he was being ridiculous, gloating about Ilya wanting to be with him, but he was so fucking happy to finally hear Ilya say it out loud that he didn’t care.

“Maybe I do not like you that much any more,” Ilya grumbled while Shane started to kiss his neck.

“Don’t lie,” Shane kissed the words into Ilya’s mouth. “You love me.”

Ilya’s lips stopped moving and Shane’s hands froze on Ilya’s shoulders. The words had just slipped out. Shane had never, *would* never ever mean to say that. But now they hung in the air and Shane pulled back, eyes still closed, hoping Ilya would ignore it and just keep kissing him.

Instead, Shane felt a large hand come up to cradle his face. Shane leaned into it and opened his eyes with a grimace, expecting to see Ilya with a similar pained expression. But he was smiling that fucking crooked grin that melted Shane’s heart.

“I do,” Ilya nodded.

“What?” Shane’s stomach lurched. There was no way.

“I said, I do.” Ilya repeated.

“You do what?” Shane almost choked on the words sticking in his throat.

“Love you,” Ilya moved his other hand to cradle the other side of Shane’s face.

“No…” Shane shook his head.

“No?” Ilya pulled his head back with a confused look.

“I mean… not no!” Shane corrected. “I just… huh? Ilya. You said you love me.” He couldn’t have been hearing that right.

“Shane,” Ilya smiled and nuzzled his nose against Shane’s. “I love you. я тебя люблю.”

“Fuck,” Shane whispered. “I love you.” And once he’d said it, he couldn’t stop.

“I love you.” A kiss to Ilya’s cheek.

“I love you.” The other cheek.

“I love you.” Forehead.

“I *love* you.” Lips on lips.

And then they were kissing frantically, sloppy and hard, teeth and tongues and hands everywhere. Ilya moved his hands from tenderly holding Shane’s face to roughly squeezing his ass and urging him into a steady grind into Ilya’s lap, eliciting a long low moan out of both of their mouths. They were both hard now, cocks rubbing roughly between layers of fabric while they tangled their tongues together.

Shane pulled his mouth away to go back to kissing Ilya’s neck, sucking and nipping and licking his pulse point, suddenly wanting to leave a mark there. No one would see them for weeks, and Shane wanted the reminder of this moment every time he looked at Ilya.

“Oh god, Shane, yes,” Ilya moaned and bucked his hips. “I want to fuck you like this, right here.”

“Here?” Shane asked, pulling off of Ilya’s neck.

“Da, here. I want you to ride me while I watch the sunset,” Ilya laughed lightly.

“You’re so weird,” Shane shook his head.

“You love me,” Ilya reminded him with a wink, and Shane beamed back at him, feeling like his face might break from smiling so wide.

“I do,” Shane agreed giddily. “Fine, I guess… I guess no one is around. Hold on.”

Shane scrambled up off the couch to grab the lube and condom that had gone unused in the bedroom the other day. When he returned, Ilya was naked, in the same spot on the couch, but now sitting on a towel he must have found in the cupboard on the deck.

“Whoa,” Shane stopped in his tracks in the frame of the sliding door, transfixed by the sight before him — Ilya sitting legs splayed, lazily stroking his hard cock, in the golden light of dusk.

“Come here,” Ilya said in a low grumble that made Shane shiver.

Shane obeyed immediately, shedding his clothes along the way, not even caring where they landed. He’d get them later, now he needed to be touching as much of Ilya’s skin as possible. He straddled Ilya’s widespread thighs and inched forward until their cocks brushed together and they both sucked in their breath. Shane loved that this position made him taller than Ilya, put him in control, and he ducked his head down to meet Ilya’s mouth in a tender, slow kiss, then another, and another.

“You are so beautiful,” Ilya murmured into Shane’s ear as he raked his hands down Shane’s back and gripped his ass. Shane gasped as Ilya groped and squeezed and trailed a finger toward Shane’s hole, then circled it gently.

“You’re,” Shane said with a short intake of air at the feeling of Ilya’s finger. “Ilya you’re… you’re stunning.”

Shane pressed the bottle of lube into Ilya's chest, a wordless request. Ilya took the hint and poured some onto his fingers, bringing them back to caress Shane’s opening again.

“Fuck, oh god, Ilya that’s so good,” Shane said this while he ran his hands over Ilya’s broad chest, stopping to tease and tweak his nipples the way Shane knew drove him crazy. If Shane wasn’t incoherent with need from the feeling of Ilya’s finger at his hole, he might have done more, but Ilya slowly pressed in a finger and Shane started losing control, opting instead to hold onto Ilya’s shoulders for stability.

They had never fucked sitting up like this, and Shane already knew he wanted it again. He loved the feeling of Ilya’s steady weight under him and his arms wrapped around him so tight that they were chest to chest. And as Ilya opened him, Shane was able to bear down on his fingers, seeking the angle he desperately wanted.

“Slow down,” Ilya shushed into Shane’s mouth. “Let me do this for you.”

“Fuck, Ilya, I need *more*,” Shane whined.

Ilya chuckled low, “So needy for me, Shane.” He slid in a third finger.

“Yes,” Shane whimpered, dropping his forehead to Ilya’s shoulder in embarrassment, but unable to deny how needy he was.

“Tell me what you need.” Ilya twisted his fingers.

“I need… unf… I need your cock. Inside me. Now.”

“So impatient.”

“Fuck you, I’m going to take back everything I said before,” Shane groaned, not meaning it, but needing Ilya to fuck him already.

“No you won’t. You love me,” Ilya said, slowly removing his fingers and planting a soft kiss on Shane’s neck. “Put the condom on me, and I will give you what you need.”

He nipped at Shane’s shoulder a few times before leaning back so Shane could sheath him and dribble some lube down his length. Shane propped himself up on his knees, and Ilya lined himself up with Shane’s opening.

“Oh, fuck, sweetheart,” Ilya threw his head back as Shane sank slowly — so slowly — down his cock, taking all of him until Shane was fully seated on his lap.

Shane was trembling with the feeling of being so full and hearing that pet name again, the one Ilya used the first time he ever fucked Shane — but never again, until now. Ilya loved Shane, and he was holding him, arms wrapped around his back, enveloping him the way Shane craved so much when Ilya was gone, and Shane loved him.

He started to drag himself up Ilya’s cock, then slide back down, setting a torturously slow pace that made every inch of Ilya feel like it was tearing Shane apart with pleasure. But Ilya’s hands, now holding his hips as Shane rode him, held him together. For several minutes, they continued this way, just breathing together as Shane steadily worked himself on Ilya’s cock, Ilya’s eyes never leaving the place where he disappeared into Shane, and Shane’s eyes locked on Ilya’s lush parted lips.

When Shane started picking up the pace, Ilya pulled Shane’s chest to his, engulfing him again and trapping Shane’s cock between them, making Shane cry out.

“Yes, so good, yes Ilya,” Shane babbled into Ilya’s neck between kisses and nibbles. “I love you.”

At that, Ilya growled and squeezed him tighter, stilling Shane and fucking up into him with powerful thrusts. Shane wrapped his arms

around Ilya's neck and surrendered to his control. Ilya had been letting Shane set the pace since he arrived, and Shane was grateful to let it go now and give Ilya the reins. Shane was tired of being in control, tired of containing his feelings and tempering his responses to Ilya and holding back. Now that Ilya was opening up to him, he wanted to let go of everything and just *feel.*

Shane moaned and whimpered as Ilya pounded up into him, maybe harder than he ever had, and Shane loved it, loved to feel like he was giving Ilya exactly what he needed in that moment. Letting Ilya *take* whatever he needed from Shane.

Ilya's grunts turned into murmurs in Russian, which made Shane's mind go hazy with lust. The words he repeated over and over again between kisses sounded familiar. Shane was sure he'd heard Ilya say them when fucking him before — maybe he was calling Shane a slut in Russian, god knew Shane felt like one now, being used like this.

Another few thrusts and Shane was hurtling towards orgasm. His cock was leaking precum and sliding across Ilya's hard stomach with every snap of his hips, giving Shane just enough sweet friction to bring him right to the edge.

"Ilya, I'm so close, please," he pleaded. He didn't even know what he was asking for, he just needed more. Ilya slammed up into him impossibly harder — it was like Ilya was letting go of something. This should have been too much for Shane, but it was somehow perfect — the intensity of Ilya fucking him matching the intensity of his feelings.

"Yes, sweetheart, come for me, let me feel you," Ilya gritted out as he pounded into him. "I love you. I love you."

That's what did it. Shane lost control and bucked his hips to meet Ilya's thighs before coming with a shudder and a shout, which he dampened by biting into Ilya's shoulder. Not hard, but enough to elicit a growl from Ilya's chest as his movements became erratic. He held Shane down and pulsed into him for a long, electric moment before collapsing back into the couch and, still holding Shane to him, kissing every part of Shane he could reach.

They stayed like that for several minutes, just breathing together and letting the sounds of the woods surrounding them fill the silence. Eventually, Shane felt disgustingly sticky from the cum sandwiched between them, and forced Ilya up and into the shower, where they

lazily kissed under the spray. Once clean and dry, they moved to the couch, where Shane put on a movie.

They didn't talk much, and Shane was okay with that. After their confessions earlier, it was the comfortable kind of quiet shared between two people who had bared a bit of their souls and could just exist together peacefully. When Ilya climbed into bed with Shane, he wore a shy smile, and despite everything they'd said and done that day, Shane felt butterflies in his stomach.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" Shane whispered into Ilya's chest when they were snuggled together in the dark.

"Yes," Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of Shane's head.

"What were you saying earlier? In Russian. When we were… you know."

"When we were fucking?" Ilya asked with a huffed laugh.

"Yeah, then," Shane said shyly, glad they were in the dark. "It sounds like something you've said before… I think you said it back in Vegas?"

Ilya didn't answer for what felt like an eternity, but was probably less than a minute. Eventually, he said in soft Russian, "я тебя люблю."

"Say it again?" Shane prompted.

Ilya spoke more slowly this time, enunciating each word. "я тебя люблю."

"Ya… tebya...lyublyu," Shane repeated in a terrible Russian accent, and flinched when Ilya grabbed his face and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"Wow," Shane pulled back, dazed. "What did I just say?"

"I love you. 'я тебя люблю' means 'I love you.'"

Shane wished the lights were on now, because he needed to see Ilya's face.

"Ilya… you said that to me in Vegas?"

"Yes," Ilya whispered.

"What the fuck?!" Shane shoved him, heart fluttering with affection,

but also furious. “You told me you love me right before telling me we had to just be friends?”

“I said already I was stupid,” Ilya pointed out wryly.

“Yeah, you fucking are,” Shane grumbled. “That’s so annoying, I’ve been holding it in for months, and you just did like it was nothing.”

He was annoyed, but he was also burrowing into Ilya’s chest with an uncontrollable need to be closer to him.

“For months?” Ilya asked into Shane’s hair. Shane could hear the smile in his voice.

“Shut up,” Shane muttered.

“No,” Ilya purred. “Want to say it again.”

“What?”

“I love you.”

Shane sighed sleepily and said, slowly and probably butchering it, “Ya… tebya...lyublyu.”

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Shane woke up the next morning to Ilya between his legs, toying with the waistband of his boxers. Realizing he was already hard, Shane blushed but didn’t stop Ilya from taking him in his mouth, and Ilya didn’t stop Shane from immediately returning the favor. They moved from the bed to the kitchen for breakfast, then the gym to workout, and then outside for a run. After lunch, they took out the kayaks and followed that with a swim and landed on the dock, where they made out lazily in the sunshine.

This became their routine: morning sex, working out, enjoying the lake and the hiking trails, eating meals together, and touching each other constantly. They riled each other up throughout the day, and by the time the evening rolled around their resolve finally broke and they took each other apart frantically or slow and sweet, or maybe a little of both.

On the afternoon of the fourth or fifth day after Ilya arrived, they had decided to race each other in the kayaks, which inevitably ended with Ilya reaching a long arm out to tip Shane over, and then jumping in

the lake after him. It turned into a race to the dock, which ended in a sort of wrestling match that left them both breathless.

Now, Ilya lay on his back, catching his breath and blocking the sun with an arm flung over his face. Shane took the opportunity to stare at the expanse of golden skin that shone in the late-afternoon glow. He raked his gaze over Ilya's forearm stretched over his eyes, then down his flexed bicep, and down further to his chest, where Shane's eyes lingered on the tattoo there. Realizing he'd never brought it up again, and needing to touch Ilya again (it had been a few minutes, and Shane didn't want to waste a second of this time alone), Shane sat up and reached out a hand to brush over the still-damp skin of Ilya's pec.

Swatting at Shane's hand, Ilya complained, "Ah! Tickles. Stop this."

Shane laughed lightly in response and pulled his hand away.

"Tell me about your tattoo, and I'll stop tickling you." He leaned over Ilya, blocking the sun, and Ilya lowered his arm to look back up at Shane. He looked a little sad, and Shane wondered if that was the wrong thing to say. As if sensing Shane's anxiety, Ilya ran a comforting hand down the arm Shane was propping himself up on.

"Will tell you after we get a beer," Ilya smiled, sadness still lingering in his eyes.

"Okay," Shane nodded and climbed to his feet, sticking out a hand to pull Ilya up too.

Handing Ilya a beer on the deck, Shane took the chair next to him and asked again. "So, tell me about the tattoo."

Ilya sighed, looking down at his chest.

"Is Mother Russia," Ilya explained. "Is like… a symbol of Russia. Our people and our country. And on her shoulder, is an eagle, from the Russian… what is the word? I do not know. Another symbol." He shrugged. "Is like, to represent what I love about Russia. My father, my brother, I do not want to honor them. Maybe I do not like to be there as much, but Russia is still… me."

Shane nodded, thinking he understood, or at least trying to. It was hard for him to conceptualize not feeling so proud of his family and where he came from, but he could absolutely understand wanting a symbol of what he did like about his home on his body.

“And what do the words say?” Shane asked, gesturing to the Cyrillic letters below the drawing of the beautiful young woman with an eagle on her shoulder.

“Ah,” Ilya took a long pull from his bottle of beer and put it on the end table. Tracing the letters with his finger he said, “It says ‘Irina.’” He swallowed hard. “Irina is my mother. Was my mother.”

“Oh,” Shane whispered. Watching as Ilya’s chest rose and fell, he gazed at the letters, which were right over Ilya’s heart. “Is that her?”

Shane’s eyes flitted to Ilya’s, and they were looking a bit glassy and red. Shane wanted to take Ilya into his arms right there and hold him, but he waited, letting Ilya speak.

“Yes,” he cleared his throat, still looking down at the tattoo. “I do not have many pictures of her, but a few. I showed the tattoo artist. So… is my country, and is my mother.”

Ilya finally made eye contact with Shane and smiled a timid, sad smile, and it was like Shane was seeing a flash of the young boy Ilya used to be. He didn’t want to make Ilya uncomfortable, but his vulnerable expression gave him hope that Ilya really did want to share.

“How did she die?” Shane asked with a hesitant whisper.

“An accident,” he said sardonically.

“An accident?” Shane asked. His hand was on Ilya’s arm now…

“Yes,” Ilya said, with a tight, humorless smile. “She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills. Oops.”

Shane froze, then squeezed Ilya’s arm tightly.

“Ilya,” Shane said softly. “I’m so sorry.” Ilya pursed his lips and shook his head… he looked like he was fighting back tears, and Shane’s heart was shattering for Ilya.

“How old were you?” Shane asked.

“Twelve.” Ilya hesitated, worrying his lip for a long time before he said in a creaky voice, *“I found her.”*

His voice broke on the last word, and Shane was on his feet, hauling Ilya up with him. Shane engulfed him in his arms and held him tight, letting

Ilya bury his face on his shoulder. He held him there, stroking his back and offering whatever comfort he could.

In Shane's eyes, Ilya was so strong, so effortlessly himself in a way that could intimidate as much as it could make everyone around him more confident. He was funny and charming and when he smiled it was like the sun — and Shane couldn't begin to fathom the depth of grief that he had to push through to become this beacon in Shane's life. Shane wished he could protect him from this awful thing that had happened so many years ago, but now all he could do was hold him.

"I don't want you to think she was weak," Ilya said. "She wasn't. She was...amazing. But she was so sad. And my father was so hard on her and..."

"You're so strong," Shane murmured in his ear. He kissed his temple. "You're incredible. I love you so fucking much."

Ilya pulled his head up and looked down at Shane, tears welling in his eyes. He blinked them away before pulling Shane into a long, languid kiss. It felt like the last of the tension that had been lingering around Ilya since he arrived was leaving him through this kiss, and Shane was more than happy to take it and release it if he could.

"I love you, Shane," Ilya choked out after he pulled back from the kiss. "Thank you."

"Let's go inside, yeah?"

Ilya nodded, and followed Shane to the couch. He collapsed onto Shane, who grunted and laughed. They tangled themselves together, Shane carding his hand through Ilya's hair and holding him in the peaceful quiet of the afternoon.

Shane felt surprisingly unburdened, like Ilya sharing the most vulnerable part of himself had actually lifted a weight from Shane's shoulders. It didn't feel heavy — on the contrary. Shane felt lighter than he had for months, knowing now, truly, that Ilya trusted him.

Chapter End Notes

> The absolute explosion of this fandom is kind of blowing my mind, and I appreciate every single person reading this who has been here from the beginning or who just got here!
>
> Comments and kudos keep me going and keep me writing!! ❤

Chapter 22: Ilya Interlude #11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rain pelted the windows of the cottage, and Shane stared out the window with his arms crossed, huffing petulantly. Ilya walked up behind him, draping his arms over Shane's shoulders and kissing his cheek over his shoulder.

"No hike today?" Ilya chuckled.

"I guess not," Shane grumbled, tilting his head back to invite Ilya into another kiss.

"Then come back to bed." Ilya mumbled while kissing a path down Shane's jaw.

"Really?"

"What else you want to do?" Ilya asked.

It had been a week of perfect sunny days in wherever-the-fuck Ontario, and Ilya had let himself be completely immersed in this idyllic and extremely boring life that Shane led. It was hard to believe life could be this easy, but the simple pleasure of waking up here every morning for the last six days with Shane in his arms had Ilya wondering: could his life actually be this good?

He knew it couldn't be. Ilya suspected that something was going on with his dad's health, and there was no way Andrei would do anything to help. He would have to go back to Russia next summer, at least to check on him.

They hadn't parted on good terms. After Ilya stormed out of Andrei's celebratory dinner, he hadn't spoken to either of them. He caught up with some old friends, continued training with the small NHL Moscow crew, and spent a lot of time texting Shane and making plans for this trip.

He'd also gotten the tattoo, kind of on a whim, but he didn't regret it for a second. He needed a reminder that Russia was his home, a place he loved even if it didn't love him back, even when he wished he didn't ever have to return. He wanted to keep this part of himself —

and keep the memory of his mother — alive, always.

So for those final weeks in Moscow, he just pretended his dad and brother didn't exist. But that was nothing new. He was sure he'd be getting a call from Andrei asking for money soon enough. It's just how things went. They'd fight, Ilya would be the disgraceful son and storm off, and then he'd show up again when called.

But Ilya didn't want to think about that now, he wanted to think about Shane and his adorably scrunched, annoyed face, whose biggest problem at the moment was a soft summer rain.

"We could hike in the rain…" Shane trailed off, determined, apparently, to keep to his routine.

"Will catch cold," Ilya reasoned, nuzzling Shane's neck.

"Who are you, my grandma?" Shane laughed.

"No," Ilya turned Shane around in his arms, and he complied easily, letting Ilya put him exactly where he wanted him. Ilya's stomach clenched with need. The way Shane let himself be manhandled by Ilya never failed to turn him on.

He grabbed Shane's chin and tilted it up before he planted a soft kiss on his mouth then said, "Am your boyfriend."

Shane grinned softly at him, "Really? You are?"

"Am I not?" Ilya asked, playfully offended.

"I dunno, we haven't really talked about that," Shane bit his lip and blushed, and Ilya had to resist taking a bite of that pink freckled cheek.

"Okay so, I am your boyfriend. Now we talked," Ilya shrugged, trying to play it cool, but suppressing a grin.

It was obviously more complicated than that, Ilya knew that. But he realized as he said it — that's what he wanted. He wanted Shane to be his boyfriend, he wanted to be Shane's. He wanted them to wake up together, and he wanted to cook Shane breakfast, and he wanted to do all the soft and sweet things he'd never even let himself fantasize about before he met Shane.

"So, I guess that makes me *your* boyfriend?" Shane asked smugly,

sliding his arms up Ilya's back to pull him closer.

"Wow, so smart, you figured it out," Ilya chuckled and captured Shane's mouth before he could tell Ilya to shut up or call him an asshole.

Instead of going back to bed, they decided to put on a movie. Of course, Shane had stocked up popcorn for them to eat while watching movies — *"It's a good source of fiber, actually"* — and he placed the bowl between them, which Ilya eyed skeptically.

"What?" Shane asked. "What's wrong with the popcorn?"

"You see no problem with this?" Ilya quirked an eyebrow at his clueless boyfriend. *Boyfriend.*

"You don't think we should have food on the couch?" Shane tilted his head to the side like a confused puppy.

"Oh my god, Hollander," Ilya rolled his eyes and grabbed the popcorn bowl, moving himself into the spot where it had been, and pulling Shane towards him with an arm around his waist.

"Oh," Shane smiled at him.

"Yeah," Ilya said, "my boyfriend is maybe not so smart."

Shane poked his side, but settled back against him. "Yeah well, *my* boyfriend is not so nice."

Ilya kissed the top of his head and they settled into a comfortable silence as they snacked and watched the movie.

If Ilya was being honest, he didn't like the movie very much. There were no cars and no explosions, not even any sex. Just a guy with his arm stuck under a boulder. Boring.

His mind started wandering to the future. After another week, they'd go back to Ottawa and start getting ready for pre-season training. As boyfriends. How the fuck were they going to navigate that? Maybe not that much needed to change. But Ilya suspected Shane would start worrying once they had left this tranquil bubble and his anxiety kicked back in. Ilya decided that he needed to formulate a plan now, so that when Shane started to freak out, he'd be ready.

Shane was *his* now, and he didn't have to be scared of how much he

wanted this anymore. They'd figure it out. *Ilya* would figure it out. For Shane.

"Hey," Shane looked up at him. "You're not paying attention."

"No. I am. He is in the rock still." Ilya gestured impatiently at the tv. "What is to pay attention to?"

"Ilya, it's about trying to figure out how he gets out of this situation. Finding a solution," Shane protested. "You don't know how this ends, do you?"

"No. You do?"

"Just keep watching," Shane laughed, and snuggled into him even more.

Ilya would watch, and then he would find a solution to *their* situation.

Chapter End Notes

> It's such a relief to finally be giving these boys some fluffy moments again. Thank you for reading!!! Your comments and kudos mean the world to me!

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> Writing this fic has been one of the most fulfilling things in my life, and I'm so grateful to every one of you for reading it. Every single comment has pushed me to keep going, so thank you!
>
> And I wouldn't have done it without Nico, dntat, and Paulette encouraging me and being my cheerleaders and helping me sort out the plot when I got lost in the sauce. You're the realest ones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Can we not stay here forever? Am tired of hockey.” Ilya whined, rolling around in the bed and flopping his arms all over Shane, who was trying not to laugh and failing miserably.

“No you’re not,” Shane chuckled while pushing Ilya’s arm off of his face. “You love hockey, and we get paid a lot of money to play it.”

“Hmph,” Ilya crossed his arms over his chest like a petulant child.

“And we’re getting paid even more money to do that CCM ad campaign, so we should probably be there for that next week.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Ilya sighed.

“We still have two more days, it’s too early for you to be whining,” Shane pointed out, unable to keep the smile out of his voice.

If Shane was being honest, he wasn’t particularly looking forward to returning to reality after the perfection of the last ten days, although he was itching to get back on the ice. But he was going to miss being unabashedly affectionate with Ilya whenever he wanted to. In typical *them* fashion, they hadn’t talked much about what the reality of being boyfriends would look like back in Ottawa. They’d mostly just lived in the moment, ignoring the outside world and narrowing their existence to the cottage and nature surrounding it.

“Have you thought about what it’s going to be like? When we get back, I mean,” Shane asked tentatively.

“Ugh Shane, is too early for that,” Ilya protested, pulling a pillow over his head.

“We have to talk about it some time,” Shane pressed. He sat up in the bed and turned to face Ilya.

“Fine, you talk,” Ilya rumbled from under the pillow.

“Well, so, I moved out of my apartment with Hayden,” Shane began.

“Yes, you told me this.”

“But um… I didn’t tell you where my new place is,” Shane chewed on his lip, nervous to reveal this to Ilya, but hoping it would be good news.

“Okay… and?” Ilya prompted with a wave of a hand.

“And it’s in your building, one floor below yours.”

Ilya flung the pillow that had been covering his face off the bed, and Shane was met with a shocked stare.

“Hollander,” Ilya monotoned. “You got apartment below me.”

“Uh, yeah.” Shane nodded, eyeing Ilya with a furrowed brow.

“You did this before we made plan for me to visit.”

Knowing his face was likely turning red, Shane huffed a little embarrassed laugh. “Yeah. I did,” he nodded again.

Shane squeaked with surprise as Ilya tackled him onto his back, looming over him with a smug grin, tongue poking between his teeth.

“Oh you love me,” Ilya teased, then nibbled on Shane’s neck.

“Hey.” Shane swatted at him. “You love me too, remember?”

“Yes, but I did not rent an apartment below yours *after* you broke up with me,” Ilya licked the spot he’d just nibbled and chuckled into the crook of Shane’s neck.

“You’re the one who broke up with *me*!” Shane rolled his eyes. “And we weren’t even together! And anyway, you said it was a good building and I should move in.”

Shane felt panicked, he thought that Ilya would be happy with this arrangement.

“It is.” Ilya propped himself up again and his crucifix dangled in Shane’s face. “Great building. Perfect now.”

“Really? You’re not annoyed?” Shane asked expectantly.

Ilya responded with a slow, sweet kiss.

“Only annoyed you will not be on same floor.”

“Well, now that we’re like… together or whatever…” That was really going to take some getting used to for Shane.

“Or whatever?” Ilya asked with a raised brow.

“Together. Period.” Shane corrected. “I think it’ll be good. We don’t have to tell anyone, but we can still be at each other’s places all the time.”

The smile that had been lighting up Ilya’s face faded, and he climbed out of the bed.

“Right,” He said as he walked towards the kitchen.

Fuck.

What had Shane done wrong? Hadn’t Ilya just said he was glad Shane would be living there?

“Ilya, wait,” Shane followed after him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ilya shrugged, opening the cabinet to get the coffee. Shane paused for a second to appreciate how familiar and comfortable Ilya was here now, how it was so easy for him to just start the coffee. But this “nothing’s wrong” shit was not going to fly with Shane anymore.

“No,” Shane approached Ilya in the kitchen, frustration brimming in his voice. “Don’t do that, don’t say nothing’s wrong when it obviously is, that’s bullshit.”

Ilya scoffed. “No, no, is good. We will tell nobody, we will sneak around, same as always, great plan.”

“Ilya,” Shane softened his tone, and placed a hand on Ilya’s forearm, which was braced on the counter.

With a sigh, Ilya said, “I am thinking. Have been thinking since last week.”

“Oh,” Shane said with surprise. “What do you mean thinking? What about?”

“Well… now we are boyfriends,” Ilya turned to lean back against the counter and pulled Shane so he was standing between Ilya’s legs.

“Yeah,” Shane grinned and rested his hands on Ilya’s hips. “And?”

“And would maybe not be so terrible to tell some people?”

“Oh.” Shane’s eyes widened in surprise. This was unexpected. Shane had kind of figured that Ilya would want to keep being boyfriends in secret, with everything he’d told Shane about how difficult it would be for him back in Russia. “Um… I didn’t think you’d want to do that.”

“Yes, I did not either,” Ilya replied honestly. “But am tired of being sneaky all the time. Thought maybe would be nice to share. Share that you are mine. I know this is not that simple, but…” Ilya trailed off.

“Well, I wasn’t sure exactly how to tell you this, but I did come out to my parents,” Shane said. “When you were in Boston. I kinda figured it was over between us, and I was sulking pretty hard. And they just kept asking what was wrong, and I didn’t tell them about you, I promise. But I did want to tell them about *me*.”

Ilya nodded along as Shane spoke, then asked quietly, “Were they, you know, okay?”

Shane smiled and his heart clenched at the memory. “Yeah, they were great. They hugged me and told me they supported me no matter what.”

“This is good, then,” Ilya brightened, and squeezed Shane’s shoulders encouragingly.

“Yeah, yeah it’s good. I mean, they’re kind of worried me being lonely, since I said I wasn’t going to be dating.” Shane gave Ilya a wry smile.

“Hmmm, yes, you are very lonely,” Ilya said, squeezing his shoulders and making Shane giggle, before turning serious again.

“But what about your family? What about Russia? I thought you said it wasn’t good there for like, gay or bi people, or whatever?” Shane asked.

Ilya sighed and looked over Shane's shoulder into the distance, as if picturing his home country in his mind right now.

"Is not good. My family definitely is not good. But… they already hate me. And if they tell anyone about me, will not be good for them either."

"But like, don't you want to go back to Russia? You'd probably be on the Olympic team in a few years."

Ilya slid his hands down Shane's arms and squeezed his hands.

"Okay, maybe we do not tell lots of people. Maybe people we trust."

"Like who?" Shane asked, skeptically.

"Like your parents?" Ilya asked. "They are good. And they *love* me. So will be very good news for them, can finally admit I am best player in Ottawa."

Annoyed, Shane tried to pull his hands out of Ilya's and Ilya squeezed them even tighter, wrapping his arms around Shane's back and pinning them there.

"Fuck you, they'll never admit that, because it's not true," Shane volleyed back, struggling against Ilya's hold on his hands but failing to hold back the fondness in his voice.

"But you want to tell them?" Ilya asked with wide eyes, sincerity seeping through the mischief in his gaze.

Shane leaned forward to give him a quick kiss, grinning, and said, "Yeah. Let's tell them."

Ilya finally released Shane's hands and wrapped him instead in a tight hug.

"I think my mom suspects something already anyway, she was asking me about you before you called me about visiting."

"Really? And she was not upset?"

"I think she was mostly upset that I was sad."

"Oh sweetheart." Ilya kissed Shane's temple. "I am so sorry I made you sad."

“It’s okay.” Shane pulled back to look at Ilya again. “You made up for it, more than enough.”

“Maybe I make up for it again, just to be safe?” Ilya asked, hands drifting to Shane’s ass and squeezing.

“Yeah, okay,” Shane beamed at him, feeling himself starting to get hard already.

***

While they rode back to the cottage from their afternoon hike, Shane’s mind was reeling with the idea of telling his parents about Ilya, about introducing Ilya as his boyfriend. It was something Shane had fantasized about a lot on Christmas — what it would be like to bring his *boyfriend* home, rather than just his teammate and friend. And, surprisingly, he imagined it wouldn’t be that different. Maybe he’d sit a little closer to Ilya, and Ilya would wrap an arm around his waist. Maybe he’d give him a kiss on the cheek after exchanging gifts. But otherwise, he thought it would be mostly the same.

The other person he was thinking about was Delzy. Shane knew Delzy would be happy for them, would be a supportive captain, and maybe he could even help them navigate this with the team, if that time ever came. He thought Ilya would probably laugh at him about how eager he was to tell him, but Delzy could be an ally to both of them in the locker room.

Shane also knew that Ilya hadn’t warmed to Delzy as much as he did. Ilya was always respectful, and he was a great teammate to everyone, but Shane sensed some sort of tension between them.

As he walked his bike into the garage with Ilya right behind him, looking sweaty and tan and so stunning Shane almost forgot what he was going to say, he tested the waters.

“So was there anyone else you wanted to tell?” Shane asked. “Other than my parents?”

“I would maybe like to tell Svetlana,” Ilya replied. “She would be good, she knows I am bisexual. And would not tell her father.”

A spark of jealousy shot through Shane, but he quelled it. Ilya wanted to tell Svetlana that Shane was his *boyfriend* — that sent a pretty clear message.

“Okay, yeah, that would be good,” Shane nodded, directing them out and around the house to the back yard and leading them over toward the dock. They’d taken to swimming in the lake after hikes before showering. “Maybe I could meet her again and be less of a weirdo this time.”

Ilya nudged Shane with his shoulder as they sat on the dock, feet dangling in the water. “I would like that very much.”

“Cool, yeah. My parents and Svetlana.”

“Anyone else?” Ilya prompted.

“Well…” Shane started, but hesitated.

“I already know,” Ilya nudged him again.

“You do?” Shane looked at Ilya, incredulous.

“You want to tell Delzy,” Ilya shrugged.

“How do you know what I’m thinking all the time?” Shane asked with a somewhat annoyed laugh.

“I am good at… I notice things? I can just tell,” Ilya shrugged again.

“Well, whatever. You’re right. I want to tell Delzy. I mean, he basically knows, right? We can just tell him that it’s official or whatever.”

“Hmm,” Ilya hummed again. “Okay.”

“What’s your issue with Dezly?” Shane poked.

“No issue,” Ilya insisted. “Just like I said before, he is like mama duck and you are baby duck following him.”

“What, are you jealous?” Shane laughed. When Ilya didn’t respond right away, Shane shot him an accusing look. “You *are* jealous!”

“Am not *jealous*. He is too interested in your life, why does he want to know all these things about what you are doing?”

“He’s *helping,*” Shane corrected. “He’s being a friend. He cares because he’s gay too, and he actually really helped me out at the beginning of the season, okay?”

“Okay fine, whatever,” Ilya grumbled.

“Ilya, I am not interested in Delzy romantically *at all*.”

“But you tried to kiss him?” Ilya asked with raised eyebrows, looking like he thought he’d really made a good point.

“Oh my *god*. I was drunk and I thought he wanted to kiss me first. And I was trying *stop* wanting to kiss you. Which was all I wanted. For the last, I dunno, nine months? So can you get over it?”

Ilya grumbled a bit more under his breath and instead of replying, he grabbed Shane’s face with his hands and kissed him hard on the mouth.

Shaking off the shock when Ilya pulled away, Shane asked, “Does that mean you’re over it and we can tell Delzy?”

“Yes, fine, tell him,” Ilya shrugged with a smile.

“Hey,” Shane beamed back at Ilya. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Ilya said with a grin before kissing Shane again, softer and more tender this time, and Shane melted under him until they were both lying flat on the dock, making out in the sunshine.

On their last day at the cottage, Shane was far less excited for his second NHL season than he ever thought he would be. It’s not that he wasn’t excited. He was. But he was going to miss the privacy and the sunlight and the way Ilya looked in the glow of the fire and the moon.

Even though he’d tried to talk Ilya out of his whining, Shane honestly felt the same. Now that he and Ilya were really and truly together, Shane wanted so much more time to just *be* together. He was even sad that they had to drive back separately, even though they were driving back to the same apartment building.

They gathered their suitcases by the front door, and Shane did one more scan of the room to make sure it was ready to be closed up until next summer.

“Are you completely sure that you packed the bottle of lube?” Shane asked, chewing on the side of his cuticle.

“*Yes* Shane. Told you three times already,” Ilya rolled his eyes.

“I know, I know. I just really don’t want my parents to find *that* if they come back before I do.”

“They will not, is with me. Though we will need to get more in Ottawa, is already half gone,” Ilya smirked and Shane turned bright red.

“Shut up.”

“No,” Ilya said with a kiss on Shane’s cheek.

“When I have my own cottage, we won’t have to worry about that,” Shane laughed.

“Your cottage?” Ilya asked with raised brows.

“Yeah, um, I was thinking that it might be nice to have my own place, like nearby still, but just for me.” He just barely stopped himself from saying “just for us.” But Shane’s stomach still flip-flopped with giddiness at the mere concept of him and Ilya being an “us.”

“There’s a property for sale about 10 minutes away, which would be even more secluded and private. So I was thinking if I worked with an agent and started planning now, maybe I could find someone to start working on it by next summer.”

“Wow, Mr. Real Estate.”

“Oh fuck off…”

Ilya laughed, and said, a little sadly, “No, sounds nice.”

“I mean… I’d want you there, like all the time, obviously.”

“Yeah?” Ilya asked, bemused, like he didn’t quite believe Shane.

“Well, yeah. I mean, you’re my boyfriend.” Shane mumbled the word boyfriend, like if he said it too loud Ilya might change his mind and run away. “And I know you probably have to go back to Russia at least for a while in the summers, but you know. Maybe we could do this every summer? I was even thinking of getting one of those synthetic rinks put into my cottage, so we could stay even longer and train there and stuff in the summers.”

Ilya shook his head with a soft smirk and pulled Shane into a hug, squeezing him tight and rocking him back and forth slightly. Shane didn’t know why Ilya was hugging him like this, but it felt like

warmth was seeping out of his heart and coursing through his entire body. He wouldn't have been surprised if there was light radiating from where their bodies connected. If he could, he'd hold Ilya here forever.

***

Back in Ottawa, they had two weeks before pre-season training camp started, and Shane was going to use the time to get his ducks in a row. As happy as he was, Shane needed to feel more settled before the season started. He'd relaxed maybe too much over the last couple of months, and if he and Ilya were going to get the Centaurs past the first round of the playoffs this season, Shane needed to focus.

After a few days back, Shane brought Ilya over for lunch with his parents, and as expected, they were thrilled (and less surprised than Shane thought they should be) to hear that Ilya was now Shane's boyfriend. His mom immediately jumped into hockey talk, reminding them both that they had to focus on their game and their career and not get distracted, which is exactly what he'd told Ilya she would say. His dad clapped Ilya on the shoulder and told him he was welcome at their house any time, and that he hoped Ilya would help Shane loosen up. As Shane expected, that was the easy part.

But as they got comfortable in their new routine, Shane started getting more nervous about telling Delzy. Ilya unhelpfully offered to invite Delzy over and make out with Shane in front of him, and told Shane he was overthinking it. Which he was. And making out with Ilya *alone* did offer some help easing his nerves.

A week had passed and they'd done their ad shoot when Shane finally worked up the courage to ask Delzy over to "see his new place." He was sure Delzy saw through that, but he couldn't talk to Delzy about this in public.

"Hollander!" Delzy bellowed, as he walked through the door and pulled Shane into a bear hug.

"You shaved your beard!?" Shane asked by way of greeting, shocked to actually be able to see Delzy's face. He had to admit, he was easy to look at. But he wouldn't tell Ilya that.

"Yeah, got too hot over the summer, it'll be back soon enough," Delzy laughed, rubbing his chin and taking the seltzer Shane handed him. No more day-drinking this close to the season.

“You look great, kid. Tan.” Delzy gave him an appraising once-over.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Shane squirmed under his gaze.

“Trying to suss out why you invited me here to see this apartment. Seems pretty standard to me…” he trailed off, looking over the modern fixtures and neutral-toned decor.

“You’re so annoying,” Shane grumbled.

“I’m just perceptive, bud,” Delzy said, following Shane to the couch.

Shane took a steadying breath as Delzy sat on the chair facing him.

“Okay, so,” Shane started. Delzy bit back a smile. “Stop smiling!”

“Is this that serious?”

“No, ugh, not really, it’s not, I don’t know,” Shane raked both hands through his hair, realizing in the moment just how nervous he was.

“Whatever it is, I’ve seen you way more freaked out than this, right?” Delzy said encouragingly.

Shane laughed, the tension in his muscles easing. “Right. You’re right.”

He took another breath.

“Ilya came to stay with me at my parents’ cottage this summer,” Shane said, looking at hands, not Delzy. “And, um, we’re. Uh. We’re together now. Like. Romantically. Like… boyfriends.”

Shane finally peered up with nervous eyes, scared Delzy might look disappointed or angry with him. He was surprised to find a big goofy grin on his face.

“No shit,” Delzy shook his head in smiling disbelief. “Boyfriends? He really… wow.”

“He really what?” Shane tilted his head to the side, confused.

“I’m just shocked Roz actually got his head out of his ass,” Delzy chuckled.

“What do you mean?”

“Look, Shane, don’t be pissed at me. But after we were knocked out of the playoffs, I kinda talked to Roz about you.”

“What? Like… what do you mean?”

“After we had lunch at my place that day, I was worried. I thought you deserved better than how he was treating you. You *do* deserve better. So I just told him to stop fucking around and either be with you or not. I swear I thought he was going to end it for good, but… well, that kid is never predictable, I’ll give him that.”

While Delzy was talking, Shane might have experienced the full gamut of human emotions. He was furious at Delzy for interfering, yet touched that he cared enough to say something to Ilya, then furious at Ilya for not telling him about this conversation with Delzy, then immediately forgiving because Ilya probably didn’t want to throw Delzy under the bus. Then back to furious at Delzy for possibly telling Ilya to break up with him — which he did, by the way — and finally landing on relief when he reminded himself that Ilya loved him, was his boyfriend, and *wanted to tell people about it.*

“And I’m sorry I did that, it wasn’t my place, but… kid, you just looked so miserable. And I know that misery. So. Yeah,” Delzy finished with an apologetic shrug.

Shane didn’t know what to say, so he just sat there. He was prepared for his own big reveal, not for Delzy to come here and admit something. He couldn’t process what to do next, so he did nothing.

After a long beat, Delzy dared to talk again. “So, are we good?”

“Huh?” Shane broke out of his reverie. “Oh yeah. We’re good. It’s all water under the bridge or whatever the saying is. I mean… I don’t know if you really helped by talking to Ilya, but we got there eventually, right?”

“Right.” Delzy nodded with relief. “So you and Roz? Boyfriends, huh?”

Shane pinched his lips to try to stop his grin, but his cheeks hurt from the effort of containing his happiness.

“Yep, boyfriends. I couldn’t believe it either.” Shane chewed on his lower lip and thought about that moment, Ilya holding him while the rain poured down, and the overwhelming love he felt when Ilya said in his perfectly imperfect English, *“Am your boyfriend.”*

Skipping some of the more private moments, Shane gave Delzy the cliff's notes of what happened between the end of the season and now, from the NHL awards to coming out to his parents to Ilya's cottage visit. Saying it all out loud left Shane feeling winded by the force of the emotional rollercoaster he'd been on since the playoffs. It was enough to last a lifetime, if you asked Shane.

"So, what are you guys thinking?" Delzy asked. "How secret do you want to keep this? Because I can keep a secret, obviously. But if that's not what you were thinking…"

With a sigh, Shane replied, "We don't know. My parents know. One of Ilya's friends knows, but his family kinda sucks. And I guess Russia's just super homophobic in general. So we definitely don't want to go fully public."

"Right, makes sense."

"And uh… so another thing is Ilya lives in this building too," Shane mumbled.

"I am well aware of that fact." Delzy put down the beer he said he needed about halfway through Shane's saga.

"You are? How? Why didn't you say something?!" Shane sputtered, and his face got hot as he felt embarrassment crawl up his chest.

"Bud, I just told you I talked to Roz after the playoffs," Delzy laughed. "I was just waiting to see if you were even going to mention it."

"I didn't realize you talked to him *in person*," Shane groaned, dragging his hands through his hair. "Okay, so now you know I moved into Ilya's building after he broke it off with me. Cool."

"Hey man, we've all done stupid things for unrequited love."

Shane laughed and hung his head. "Well, when you put it that way…"

"You're just fucking lucky as hell that this worked out for you," Delzy said through another wheezing laugh.

"Yeah, well. I only even said anything because I can see if he wants to come up so we can talk about our plan. I wanted to tell you alone first, in case you were pissed or something."

Delzy rolled his eyes, but rubbed his hands together and said, "Sure,

let's get Roz in here. We can strategize."

Once Ilya was settled on the couch next to Shane, they talked through their options. Delzy ticked them off on his fingers to recap. "One. Keep the circle small and tell no one else. Safest option, probably."

"Well, actually, I'd want to tell Hayden, too. He'd be so pissed if I didn't." Shane reasoned.

Ilya quirked an eyebrow. "Seriously, Shane?"

"What? He's my best friend on the team?"

"***I*** am your best friend on team, or Delzy at least." Ilya gestured to the man in front of them with a perturbed face.

"You guys don't count."

Delzy snorted, "You two are basically an old married couple already, I love it. But can we stop the bickering for a second?"

Ilya wrapped an arm around Shane's waist and tugged him closer on the couch while Shane grumbled.

"Okay, option two. Let some of the guys in on it, like Hayden and the other veterans who know about me, this could be okay and give you guys some more cover. Or three: tell the whole team — management and everything — and hope that they're accepting and don't try to trade one or both of you. Most risky, but it would be great if you don't have to hide as much, and Jessica in PR would be a great ally."

They all sat in contemplative silence for a moment, Shane chewing on his lip like it was his last meal and Ilya drumming his fingers on his knee. Shane really didn't know what to do. He wanted to keep this relationship safe, protect it from anyone who might use it to ruin their careers — ruin their lives. But he also wanted to shout from the fucking rooftops that he was in love and Ilya Rozanov was in love with *him*, and fuck anyone who didn't support them.

He really wanted to know what Ilya was thinking. Like, he needed to know right now before he could even think about what he wanted. He turned to Ilya with wide, pleading eyes, silently asking him to *please* just say something.

Looking at Shane, Ilya's expression shifted from unsure to warm to determined within the span of two seconds. "I think option two. We

tell the guys we know we can trust. Not everyone. But enough that it does not feel like we will die from holding a secret. Okay for you?"

Shane nodded almost imperceptibly, and finally released his lip from the clutches of his teeth to tip the corners of his mouth up in a small smile. "Okay."

They both turned to look at Delzy, who was shaking his head at them with a rueful smile.

"If that's what you want to do, you've got me behind you, boys."

Shane thought he saw the shimmer of a tear in Delzy's eyes, but he blinked and it was gone.

"Thank you, Delzy."

Ilya said it first, to Shane's surprise.

"Yeah, Delzy." Shane felt himself getting choked up and internally cursed himself. "Thank you, for everything this past season. And for this."

"Shane is lucky to have you," Ilya said, then shook his head. "*We* are lucky to have you."

"You're fucking lucky to have each other," Delzy said, and there was definitely a tear threatening to breach his lashes. "Remember that."

***

Ilya stayed in Shane's apartment after Delzy left, and just didn't go back to his place that night. They lay in bed, the only light coming from a beam of city lights between curtains, facing each other, feet tangled together.

"You still feeling good about our decision?" Shane asked, lightly stroking a hand over Ilya's face to the back of his head.

"Yes. You?" Ilya nuzzled into Shane's hand, and Shane started scratching his scalp like he was a cat begging for pets.

"Mmhmm," Shane nodded, scooching himself closer to Ilya to kiss him softly.

"You excited for training camp to start?" Ilya asked and snaked his arm under Shane to pull him onto his chest.

“I wasn’t really, before. I was so nervous about what we were going to do,” Shane admitted. “But I’m excited now. I’m ready to make last season look like a practice run.”

Ilya laughed and squeezed Shane tighter.

“I am ready to get more points than you this season,” Ilya muttered into Shane’s hair.

“Fuck off, there’s no way that’s happening.” Shane scoffed, even though he had only beaten Ilya by one point last season. He was confident he’d beat him again. “I’m ready to score more goals than you this season.”

“No way, Hollander,” Ilya smirked at him and nudged Shane’s chin up with a knuckle and softly pressed his lips to Shane’s, once, then twice.

“It’s going to be good though, right?” Nervous again, Shane began to wonder if maybe being together would be more of a distraction than just hooking up.

“Will be better than good. The best.” Ilya kissed him again, deeper this time.

“How do you know?” Shane couldn’t help but ask.

“Because we are two of best players in NHL. Because Delzy will support us.” Ilya kissed him again, slipping his tongue into Shane’s mouth, making Shane’s body turn to putty in his hands and erasing his worries.

“Because you are Shane fucking Hollander and I fucking love you.”

Chapter End Notes

One more Ilya Interlude, and then we're done bbs □

Chapter 24: Ilya Interlude #12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the list of things that Ilya should not have done — and it was a long list — one thing rose to the top: he should not have fallen in love with Shane Hollander.

But here he was, in the kitchen of Yuna and David Hollander, the day before their first preseason game, helping cut tomatoes for the salad they were all having with lunch, while Shane set the table. It felt unsettlingly easy, like there had to be a catch, a pitfall, a tripwire that Ilya would snag and bring it all crashing down.

When Ilya decided to go to Shane's cottage, he knew it was a risk. He knew he had hurt Shane deeply when he left for Russia, and when he'd left for Boston before that, even when they fought during the playoffs, and he feared Shane might not be so quick to forgive again. He would be right not to, Ilya certainly didn't deserve it.

Or maybe he did.

That was the thing about being with Shane, being loved by Shane. It made Ilya think crazy things like maybe his life could be good, maybe he did deserve love and happiness and to be part of a family who spent easy Sunday afternoons together making lunch and playing Yahtzee. It took ten months of being loved by Shane — first as a teammate, then friend, then something more — and returning back to the cold and cruel people he called family to make him realize it.

He knew Shane was scared. Hockey was Shane's whole life. His identity was wrapped up in being Shane Hollander Hockey Player, and Ilya would try his hardest to protect that for him. It was going to be risky, putting their trust in teammates who had no obligation to keep their secret. It was even more risky for Ilya, who didn't know what exactly would be in store for him back home if they were found out.

But Ilya had already taken the biggest risk possible by opening his heart to Shane, and it brought him a sense of belonging and security he thought he'd never feel again. And he wanted the whole world to know — Shane Hollander loved *him*. If it was only a few teammates and some friends now, that was fine, he could wait.

“Hey,” Shane sidled up next to him at the kitchen counter. “You gonna slice the rest of that, or just stare at it?”

Ilya glanced down at the knife in his hands. “Ah, yes. Sorry, lost in thoughts,” he said as he finished cutting the tomato in front of him.

“Everything okay?” Shane asked, brows furrowed adorably.

“Yes, of course,” Ilya turned to Shane and gently rubbed a thumb over the crease in his forehead.

“Hey,” Shane batted his hand away with a little laugh.

“Where are your mom and dad?” Ilya asked.

“I think my dad’s downstairs watching the baseball game, and my mom went outside to grab some flowers for the table. Why?”

Ilya took Shane’s face in his hands and pulled him in for a soft kiss.

“That’s why,” Ilya answered, grinning at the color rising on Shane’s cheeks.

“What was that for?”

“I am happy.”

“Yeah?” Shane beamed at him. “I’m happy too.”

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you for your comments, thank you for your kudos, and thank you for recommending this fic. It has meant the world to me and got me through this fucking weird and terrible year as a human on planet earth.
>
> This fandom is my home now, I love you.
>
> Я тебя люблю

End Notes

Thank you for reading!!!!

I've said it before, every comment and kudos gives me the external validation I always craved but never got from my parents, so thank you for that too. <3

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